

STORIES OF MORALISTIC HORROR



SOUP OF

SOULS

EDITED
BY

STEPHEN W. ROBERTS & S.E.COX

SOUP OF SOULS

A collection of Moralistic Horror short fiction
By Panic Press:

Edited by Stephen W. Roberts
Co-Edited by S.E.COX

Soup of Souls

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

STRANGER DANGER

S. E. Cox.....7

THE FIRST STONE

Angel Propps.....11

DRY HEAT

Chantal Boudreau.....18

JACK'S HORN

Neil Leckman.....28

TWISTER SISTER

Tonya Lambert Kropp.....31

CHAMELEON

Lori Lopez.....35

TAGGED

Nate D. Burleigh.....42

AND WHO CAN SAY WHAT WILL BE DELIVERED?

Ken L. Jones.....55

LET THE DEAD BE DEAD

Kevin L. Jones.....60

I AM VICTIM
Rob M. Miller.....63

SOUL BIDDER
Iain Paton.....76

LUNCH HOUR
Paul Germano.....82

HEALTHY
Alan Spencer.....89

THE GHOST OF MERRICK MANSION
E.W. Bonadio.....96

THESE DRUGS ARE LOVELY
Jason Hesse.....103

BLOOD, BODIES, AND WISHES
Suzanne Robb.....108

IF YOU EVER MEET A GIRL NAMED MAISIE MAE
Nathan Robinson.....115

JUST SAY NO
Todd Martin.....125

DIARIES OF CEPHALIC DESCENT
Jason Hughes.....128

POSSESSED BEAUTY
Thadd Presley.....138

L'UOMO COTTO/THE COOKED MAN

Tammie Painter.....143

NO MAN LEFT BEHIND

Scott M. Goriscak.....148

1,000,000

Nick Bryan.....156

ASHER'S ENNUI

George Whilite.....166

SKIN DEEP

Stephen W. Roberts.....175

STRANGER DANGER

S.E.COX

Lightly kissing your children goodnight, you pause over their bed, a hand on your chest, your heart beginning to pound. It's not the first time you have done this but you pray to god that it will be the last, though you did that the last time. And the time before that. With no electricity or gas and no money for food until your benefit check comes in five days from now, the last resort is to head out into the street, to do whatever you can to put breakfast on the table for your weary children in the morning.

Taking one last look in the hallway mirror; checking your make-up and hair, you brush yourself down, slip on your heels and grab your bag. Opening the front door, you shiver as the cold air slaps you hard in the face. Taking a deep breath, you step out into the cold night and silently close the door. You are good friends with your neighbours on both sides. Your breathing wavers and heart pounds as you try not to think of them finding out what you are doing. A quick glance of the surrounding houses tells you that most of the street is asleep. No one will see you as long as you move quickly under the cover of darkness.

You race across the field and down towards the alley that leads out onto the busy street, falling about the gravel and stones on your heels, desperately trying to hold yourself up. The alley is a long path consisting of an uncovered pathway, and a short tunnel. The path is cobbled and again your ankles give way beneath you several times but you pick yourself up and keep going. You must get going to give yourself enough time to get the job done and get home with breakfast before dawn.

You know from experience that the short tunnel at this time of night will harbour many undesirables; tramps, drunks, and a few low class prostitutes giving blow jobs for a fiver, not caring who it is and who is watching.

Folding your arms across your chest you rub them hard to keep warm. A coat would have been a good idea, but to stand out from the rest of them, you need to be dressed correctly and a coat would have made you look like a normal passer-by.

One by one the street lights behind you begin to disappear as you near the tunnel. Darkness surrounds you. Intensity inflicts pain on your temples like a screwdriver being drilled into your brain. It's telling you to turn back. To go hand in hand to your parents. But your legs will not stop walking. Your eyes fixed on the goal. To bring home money and food.

Entering the tunnel, the silence astounds you. There is unusually no one around. It has been a few weeks since you last came out. The tramps and drunks must have found a new place; the prostitutes moved on or

banged up. The sound of your breathing and the crunching of the leaves beneath your feet is all that you hear. That and the whistling of the wind as its icy chill circles you, sniping at your body, begging you to turn back. But you ignore its harsh warning and continue on your route through the tunnel.

And then you sense him.

The cold hands of death, walking his fingers up your spine, massaging your shoulders whilst placing icy kisses along your neck, whispering evil thoughts in your ears. You know he's coming. You can even picture his face in the darkness.

He's behind you.

Your footsteps quicken; just a little at first and then as you glance around, your feet take on a life of their own, forcing you into a half run. All the while looking behind you to try and see the face of dark shadows following you. You gasp when you trip over a large rock on the ground. It catches your foot and you side slam down into a deep puddle. Letting out a wavering whimper, you cringe as blood spills from a gash in your head and excruciating pain erupts through your body as the impact has possibly cracked some ribs. You quickly and painfully haul yourself up, discard your heels and get to running again – ignoring the pain, you just have to get out of here alive. The pain hits your senses from every angle but you run letting your blood-sodden hair stick to your face.

Behind you, you can hear him coming. You are so close to freedom and yet so far away. You see the light from the street lamps at the end of the tunnel, but your body is slowly giving up.

But you make it to the end and run out onto the streets. You stand for a second, your chest heaving trying to catch a breath. You're on the corner of another street, trying to remember which way to go. You have only lived around these parts a few weeks and don't know this part of town that well. Tears streaming down your cheeks as you try to stay silent, keeping your breathing even while you concentrate. You lack food and water, you're weak from running. Your body trembles, unsure which way to go. But it's already too late. He has found you. You feel a hard hand grip at the nape of your neck. You freeze.

"Hey little lady," says a voice.

You whip around to see a scruffy male, mid-thirties at least, with a half smoked cigarette hanging from his pursed lips.

"What is a young, beautiful girl like you doing wandering the streets alone at this time of night?"

You stare at him, as he takes a long drag from his cigarette and walks towards you. You take a step back, stumbling on the uneven ground. He leans forward and grabs your arm. His hands move to your waist as he grips you hard pulling your body into his. You can smell the stale stench of alcohol mixed with nicotine on his breath as he sneers, gripping your waist

tighter. You move your head back, wrinkling your nose.

"You know, lots of bad things can happen to young defenceless women around this way," he whispers into your ear as he strokes the side of your face with a yellow stained index finger. "Sex and murder are the only real pleasures left to man."

You turn back to look at him. You stare straight into his eyes. You tell yourself you're not afraid. You know you're stronger than this. "And which one are you going to use me for?" you ask, your voice intrepid.

"Maybe both," he whispers in your ear with a throaty snigger.

You don't flinch as he moves his finger from your face and grips your neck. He looks at you, confused by your reaction, or lack of. "Aren't you afraid of me?"

You don't answer. He release's his hand from your throat, and presses it against the wall above your head, caging you in. He looks over your face trying to read you, amused by your statue like presence.

Eventually you speak up. The time is right, you're ready. "What's your name?" you ask curiously.

The man snorts and spits on the ground. "Yeah right, like I am going to tell you that."

"Why not?" you say confidently, slowly reeling him in. "You will only kill me anyway, so what is the harm in telling me your name?"

The man looks shocked. "Kill you? What the..." He trails off and takes a step back. "Lady I wasn't going to kill you, I was only having a little fun."

You lean away from the wall and stand up straight. You take a step towards him, your head down, but your eyes looking up at him beneath your dishevelled blonde hair. "Do you have a wife?" you ask, your voice purring provocatively.

The man coughs uncomfortably. "No, I don't," he replies quietly.

"A girlfriend then maybe?"

"No, no girlfriend either."

"Any kids that depend on you?" you continue.

The man screws up his face. "No I don't," he says, indignant of the questions. "What is this, twenty questions?"

You ignore his complaining and continue prying. "So no one would miss you if something happened to you then?"

He seems wary of you now. The tables have turned.

"N... no... I guess not," he stammers.

"Well that is good news," you reply, running your tongue across your lips.

His eyes widened, as you wrap your hand around the back of his neck and pull his face close to yours. You can see the lustful thoughts flash through his eyes, before you push his head aside, exposing his neck. Before he has a chance to protest, you sink your teeth deep into his neck, and pierce his jugular vein with your razor like teeth. The blood flows easily, thick and

faster than you can gulp it down. He struggles under your strength. You can feel his heart racing as you drink more.

After a few minutes of sucking the sweet nectar straight from his veins, his pulse slows and his struggle lessens. You quickly delve into your purse and pull out a plastic bottle. Holding it up to the spurting vein, you collect as much of the free flowing blood as possible. A smile creeps across your face as it fills quickly.

As the blood flow begins to slow, you crouch down next to him and press three fingers to the ground. His eyes flicker as his life slowly begins to fade. As his eyes open for the last time, you lean in close and whisper into his ear: "Didn't your mother ever teach you not to talk to strangers?"

The moral is: never talk to strangers...

THE FIRST STONE

Angel Propps

Bobby Lew was a song and dance man from way back. He had grown up in a backwoods Southern Baptist church where the followers walked on fire and handled snakes. By the time Bobby was a young teen it had already become clear to him that out of all the families who wept, screamed, sobbed and groveled in the heated little building or in the red clay clearing where they held services it was the preacher's family that had enough food to go around and good clothes to wear when they went into town. The rest of the congregation spent their money on first their vices and then their redemption.

He understood something else too. It was not religion the preacher was selling, it was fear. He was selling fear wrapped in a package of good old fashioned entertainment and offering up redemption as a reward to those who bought in. And people loved it. They loved to be told they were scabby scrubby sinners; they needed to be forced to face the deadly, the ugly, the blackness at the edges of their vision. The only thing that made them feel like they were protected and forgiven was handing over their money and weeping in front of their peers at a preacher's feet.

Bobby Lew walked out of the swamp surrounding the hovel of his childhood with a grim determination to use what he knew to make something of himself, a fifth of his daddy's homemade whiskey and the family Bible. Somewhere on the road into Nashville he discovered he could 'see' demons. He also found an affection starved girl with a body the devil himself would have been hard pressed to ignore wilting away on a tiny farm in the center of exactly nowhere and charmed her away, renaming her Esme along the way. The two of them put on a traveling show all the way through Tennessee and Arkansas and when they got discovered faking her demon attacks one night in front of a crowd of about twenty they ran for Alabama.

Twenty five years later Bobby stood on a makeshift stage looking at Esme walking towards him. Thanks to their wise decision to never have kids she had kept her figure, thanks to their public weeping and wailing over the fact they were unable to conceive many had felt the need to extend sympathy, much of it monetary. It never ceased to amaze him how many needed to be cured of the demons they felt inside themselves, how many were afflicted and lost and desperate to avoid the fires of Hell itself no matter the cost. They had never achieved the big name and money fame he had hoped for in the beginning but they rolled into the towns they fleeced in a beautiful long black Cadillac, had a nice home on a lake that sat peacefully dozing under the Maine sun and when they wanted a city and some fun

they hopped a train and picked one of the many bastions of sin and greediness that dotted the Eastern seaboard. The people who knew the couple as a wild and fun loving duo who could drink you under the table, curse like sailors and who knew many a way to find satisfaction in the flesh would have been shocked to know what they did for a living.

The town they were in was like hundreds of others. Dirt poor. Southern. The breeze brought the smell of black soil mixed with the creepy rasp of the kudzu vines as they strangled every ounce of life from the trees they hung from. The people had offered the tent from the funeral home and the speakers had come from a bar that had once done a booming business on what had been the main street. Like everything else in that failed and dead place it was dark and closed. Bobby always judged a place by how many out of business signs were plastered in the windows of the business district. It was the truest measure of how desperate the place truly was.

The crowd was stunned by the sight of them up on the stage. The lights the couple carried with them had been hung and now they shone above them. The men stared at Esme in the demure dress that only emphasized the wanton figure under it, licked their lips and moved nervously closer to the wives who did not notice because they were too busy staring at the preacher. Bobby and Esme gave each other little smiles, sure that the crowd was, like every crowd before them, awed by their good looks and the immaculate white clothes that they purposely chose to bring purity and light to the minds of those in the audience. There was an electric hush in the air, the sense of something coming. Bobby held out his hands and said in his soothing alto, "Hear me my children. This town...this lovely and wonderful place...has been overrun by demons."

The usual cries broke out on the edges of the crowd. A few voices yelled agreement and some others hushed those speakers. Bobby held his hands out in a calming gesture and the crowd settled and stilled. "It is not too late children. You see I came into this town and I saw destruction... oh children I saw empty buildings where thriving businesses once stood."

"Amen!" A portly woman yelled from the crush at the front of the makeshift stage, "We need something here and the Lord knows it!"

"We must sacrifice to find forgiveness!" Came another cry.

Bobby had to bite back a smile. The people in dying places always wanted to give everything they had. They dragged out the last of their cash in a last ditch effort to find some redemption. It was almost pathetic how much they were willing to give in order to try to save their sad miserable little towns, none of which were worth saving in his opinion.

"I came here children to tell you I saw the darkness creeping over this place. I saw darkness sliding its way into your homes, across the sleeping faces of your children! I saw darkness and it was coming in a tide I tell you, a tide!"

A low collective moan went up. A fat man in oil stained jeans spat

tobacco juice sideways and screamed out a loud Praise Jesus, revealing brown stumps where there should have been teeth. The tight and barely controlled rage that was always at a low simmer in towns like that hovered a bit too close to the surface so Bobby cued Esme. She went to the CD player, put on the gospel karaoke cd they had bought a few months back, put the mic to her lips and began to sing. Instantly the crowd fell silent. Esme was possessed of a lovely contralto that slid and slurred its way across vowels like honey being poured slow and steady. The words rose and a voice near the back picked up the chorus, then more joined in. Soon most of them were singing.

The music pulsed up and on. Esme finished the first song, took a quick check of the crowd and sang a second. When that one ended she stepped back behind the speaker and cut the CD player off.

Bobby began to speak in a low and husky murmur, his huckster's instincts telling him he needed to keep them hushed and pliant for a little while. They needed peace, needed guidance into the state of mind that would have them merrily allowing themselves to be shorn of their greasy bills and sweating piles of coins. They would offer them a free room in the ratty motel and the old ladies would cook their best foods, muttering prayers as they took down the last carefully preserved jars of pickled pears and spiced peaches from their shelves and carefully measured sugar and meal into a greased cast iron skillet. They would sacrifice everything they had to him and Esme and he began to amp them up again a notch, talking of sin rising in a tide across the land, sweeping aside the good and the just. He mixed Old Testament and New, prayed for healing, begged for salvation and then he really put the boots to them.

"I see demons children! You might have heard this of me and I tell you it is true! I see demons and I can cast them out! The Bible says let he who is without sin cast the first stone and I say to you I am the man who knows where to throw those stones! I see the demons, the dark ones who come stalking into your town, who stop the rain from falling on your fields, who talk into the ears of rich men and cause them to close the mills that once sustained you down!" His fist pumped the air, the crowd roared and Esme went back to the CD player and came out singing. That time it was no sweet old gospel it was a real roof raising foot tapping barn burner of a revival song. Faces shone in the dimness, heads bowed and nodded, hands raised high in the air. A long sob rose and women began to talk in tongues, to faint from excitement and emotional overload.

"There are demons here!"

"Yes!" The crowd screamed back.

"We must cast them out!"

"Yes!"

"We must be ruthless in our sacrifices, we must offer it up...oh my children we must dig deep and give it all! We must look to those who know

how to deal with these demons and we must listen to the words! We must do what it is best for us to do no matter how great the sacrifice!"

"I see demons!" Someone screamed and a long wolf like howl of frenzy went up from the crowd.

Fear showed at the corners of Esme's eyes and even Bobby felt a small twinge of fright. They had stopped in that silent and desolate town on a whim and he suddenly wondered why it was that after all the years of crossing that state they had never run across it before. The crowd was shoving and screaming, the stage shuddered under the weight and a light crashed down, nearly hitting Esme.

"Calm them down!" Esme whispered frantically, "Or let's say fuck it and run. I don't like this one at all."

"We'll split, just let me distract them." Bobby whispered back and then he walked to the edge of the stage, held his hands out and waited, hoping the crowd would become silent. To his relief it did.

"My children I know how you feel." From the corner of his eye he saw Esme creeping towards the back of the stage, getting ready to dash for the Cadillac, "I know how hard it is when you are down and there seems to be no way to get back to where you were..."

"There is a way! The same way we always had! We got to slay them demons!" A burly redneck bellowed and cold fear trickled down Bobby's spine and hit his bowels.

"Kill the demons!" It was a war cry, a rallying call to arms. Bobby felt a scrim of sweat envelope his whole being and he slowly took one small step backwards, not daring to turn his head to see how close to the car Esme was and a small dismayed shriek from behind him made his heart literally thud into the walls of his chest.

A strange man came dragging a wildly kicking and flailing Esme back onto the stage and the crowd let out a huge soft sigh and fell into an eerie silence broken only by the whimpers coming from Esme. Bobby wanted to move, to do something but all he could do was stare at the man who held his wife and partner in crime so tightly. He was tall, too tall in fact; he rose to an almost impossible height and the hair that brushed his too narrow shoulders was the softest purest white. His eyes were a near red and Bobby thought, Albino, but then dread filled his gut and he forgot to think about the man's heritage because he began to speak in a voice that sent chills creeping across his flesh.

"My children," said the newcomer, "Did I not tell you that if you would but believe the sacrifice would show itself? Did I not tell you that if you were only able to have faith you would see the blood flow and our town come back to life around you?"

"Amen!" An old woman cried and then she spat at Bobby's feet. A long silvery spool of drool lay across the toe of one of his highly polished shoes and he stared at it, unable to comprehend what was happening.

"What is wrong with you people?" Esme screamed, "We came here to help you!"

"Be still demon!" The man holding her coupled his roar with a ferocious squeeze that pushed every bit of air from her lungs; Bobby heard the hiss of it escaping. He felt like a fly caught in amber, he took half a step and his knees went weak. Esme was weeping and it occurred to him that she was forty five now. With her makeup running and her hair a tangled mess she was no longer quite so appealing. He wondered if he found someone younger and prettier if that would help boost business and then the crowd began to chant. There was a brief moment of blackness filled with odd glimpses of starlit sky and the smell of a fire. He found himself possessed of a sudden longing for a barbecue sandwich and then he was stumbling along behind a group of people, his feet clacking across a broken sidewalk and every empty store window reflecting back a strange image.

He could hear Esme screaming, could hear women singing an old hymn but nothing seemed to be able to touch him. He kept straining to look into those blank windows, fighting to see what was looking out from them.

"I see demons," he said but nobody was listening.

The glow that had begun as a small and dull thing to one side of the town's main street suddenly became a pyre. He stared at it and piss ran down his legs, wetted the street and pattered against the gloss of his shoes. He didn't notice. Three women had Esme by the hair: that long honey blond hair that she would spread across the two of them like a veil, the hair she liked to feel swinging across her back, and she was kicking and biting and clawing as they hauled her dangerously close to that fire. It amused him somewhat to see her fighting, he could have told the women that Esme Lew nee Rhonda Sue Jenkins was a wire grass girl from South Georgia, she was tougher than she looked and he actually laughed when Esme screamed, "You are coming with me then bitch," grabbed a double handful of a young and lovely girl's hair and took her with her indeed as they shoved her into the shooting flames of the pyre. Bobby could not tell whose screams were whose and he supposed it did not matter, he was sure they both screamed equally. Bobby looked back at a window. In its smeared and soaped over eye he saw himself. A grinning grotesque thing in a white suit with gold teeth and a look of utter greed on its swollen pock marked face. He was ugly, twisted by his desire for money and material things and he felt his lips form an old prayer as he was lifted high on the shoulders of the men and tossed into the fire.

He saw them, saw the capering terrible things dancing around the perimeter of the sacrificail pyre. he felt a pain so intense it took everything from him and as his fat sizzled and dripped onto the blazing figure that had once been either Esme or some unnamed young woman he screamed the truth out to them, "I see you, you damn demons! Let he who is without sin cast the first stone...the first..." His words were lost in a shower of sparks

and a last burst of consciousness.

"Reverend Jones!" The woman who had spat on Bobby's shoe cried as she gyrated madly in front of the preacher, "Did you see the car those demons came here in? We could use a car like that over at the funeral parlor, it would be nice to give our dead a ride in something that grand."

"That it would be Sister Ruth." Reverend Jones replied but his eyes were on the sky, on the black bits of ash that sifted through the smoke and a small mean smile rode his cruelly thin lips. Sister Ruth, looking at him, felt a trembling fear in her old gut. The smudgy night, the orange red dance of the fire light and the grey tendrils of smoke surrounded their leader and for one moment he appeared monstrous, demonic and terrifying to her. As she stood there looking at him he seemed to swell and thicken, his eyes grew redder and bulged but then she blinked and he was just good old Reverend Jones again. And no matter what, he was the one who did whatever it took every time their town needed saving.

As she turned to the fire a strange thought came to her. How often had they found themselves dancing at one of these burnings? And how many lifetimes would it take for someone to see as many as she had? Why was it that the morning after a good old burn there were new trees growing along the no longer dried out river? Why was it that families were suddenly in place and sitting down at loaded supper tables and who were those people anyway? She had the vague sense that none of what she knew was real but when she held her palsied right hand out to the fire she could feel the penetrating heat of the flame.

The words she had heard from the fire sent a shiver across her heart. That damned demon had screamed out that the one without sin should cast the first stone and she suddenly thought of the old saying her mama had had that people who lived in glass houses should not throw stones. But what about fire? Was there a saying about fire?

"Rest easy Sister Ruth."

She turned towards Jones and saw both a warning and a rebuke written in his eyes and she felt that traitorous thought...glass houses...cross her mind on swift little feet but she cut it off and went back to the fire and her friends and the dancing.

Bones shifted uneasily in the fire and a long breeze blew the rich scent of cooked flesh into the night. Some distant beast howled. Reverend Jones watched his merry band with an amused expression. He knew that in the morning the town would be alive again. There would be grass in the square and fresh paint on the buildings. Whistling men would open stores and if someone paused and looked about nervously or wore the half aware expression of someone caught in a dream that look and small fear quickly disappeared from them.

And there would be a new couple in the cute little bungalow on the east side of the church. A younger preacher come to help him carry on and

spread the word. To tell the truth he had grown bored with the little bubble he had built, with his little experiment in Hell on Earth, and having a good song and dance man in place to keep things going would be just the thing.

He watched the bloated shadows of his followers, seeing the decay on their faces, the rot in their souls and he began to laugh.

“Here there be demons,” he laughed and went to join the dance.

The moral is: Let those who are without sin cast the first stones.

DRY HEAT

Chantal Boudreau

The desert air is parching on the best of days, but today carries with it the harshest kind of heat – dry heat. I lie here in my bed of sand, my skin wrinkled with salt, and my eyes puckered with their lids crusted open. I am not dead, but one would think that I was if they saw me in this state, with limbs frozen seemingly in rigor and eyes staring up at the glare of the sun, a fiery ball in the misleadingly cool blue sky. I do not blink even when the wind blows the blistering sands across my face. I do not cringe from the baking heat that surrounds me. I still breathe, but no one recognizes that fact, since the movements are so shallow and I make no sound.

I am not alone in this ocean of eroded stone. There are others who lie still around me, awaiting a similar fate, only they do not breathe any longer. Their spirits may linger, not willing to relinquish their tenuous hold which the priests strengthen with their magic, but their bodies hold no life. The priests tend to me as well, thinking that I am just like the others. I cannot find my voice to tell them otherwise, and they do not look closely enough at me to catch the odd twitch or tremor. They chant and raise their hands, occasionally shielding their faces from the blowing sands. They do not know how fortunate they are to be able accomplish this meagre task. How I wish I could prevent the persistent bitter sting.

Anywhere but here, coated in the natron than absorbs any moisture that manages to rise to the surface of my skin, and preserves the bodies of those already dead, the difference between me and the others would have been obvious by now. They would be rotting and reeking, while I would remain whole. Or I would be dead by now as well because I have not eaten or drunk in days, but the same sacred magic that binds the spirits to the bodies of the dead nobility also prevents me from escaping my own mortal coils, with just enough life remaining in me to separate me from the many corpses.

I would rather be dead, instead of existing in this living hell. A punishment of my own making, you could say...

* * *

The three men waited outside the door, hearing the muffled screams within and waiting for answers. One was dressed in the rich threads of the higher caste, clothing befitting one of Nestat Pasha's status. He held himself proudly too, head high, eyes raised and jaw tensed. His skin was a healthy bronze colour, but showing the wear of time in places such as the lines at the

curve of his mouth, the crow's feet by his eyes and the set of his brow. His nose was hooked and hawk-like and his black hair was beginning to silver at the temples.

The two others did not offer such haughty bearing. One was dressed in the simple clothing common to the lower castes, and the only reason Bassir was present at this moment was because he was a favoured manservant of the nobleman. He remained silent until required to speak, his head bowed and his eyes lowered.

The other, who had just arrived, was someone whose place rested somewhere between the other two. Neither poor nor wealthy, he wore the look of a scholar, and at present served as the Pasha's advisor.

"How fares your honourable wife?" Ehsan inquired breathlessly. He was fairly certain that the sounds from the other room suggested the outcome was a poor one. She had been unsuccessful at carrying a male child to term so far, and this time, it would seem, would prove no different "I sought out the apothecary, as the priests requested. The concoction to ease her pain and settle her dolour will follow, once the blending is complete. Will they be able to save the child?"

Nestat grimaced, his eyes cold. He blamed his wife for her failure to present him with an heir, and despite her great beauty, he wished for once the priests' interventions would fail to draw her back into this realm. If her spirit were to follow that of the child into the realm of death, he would be free to choose a new Great Wife, one who was functional as a proper woman as well as fair. He was not a pharaoh and his status limited him to only one, although consorts he had many. His wife had borne him a daughter, so he could not divorce her on the basis of childlessness, nor could he prove adultery either.

"They have not announced such things to us, as of yet, but it does not bode well. Her womb is weak, and my seed strong. It is highly unlikely that she will ever yield a viable son. She has not even managed another daughter after Ahura."

Nestat's daughter was as beautiful as her mother, and if he had not resented her so much for not being a boy, he likely would have considered her one of his greatest treasures. Instead, she was a constant reminder of his wife's failings.

Ehsan opened his mouth to comment, but was silenced by a shrill scream before he could speak. The scream reverted to a wail, which degraded into sobs. The scholar recognized those sounds from the last time he had attended one of Shoshani's early deliveries. Her womb had ejected another stillborn child, come too soon, and from the level of her distress, it had been boy.

"Let her die this time," Nestat hissed under his breath. "Let her die."

But the gods were unwilling. One of the priests emerged from the birthing chamber just as another person arrived in the crowded corridor.

The new arrival was a young man who carried with him a package.

"She will live," the holy man assured Nestat, ignoring the men of lower caste. "The other priests are completing the ceremony to guide your son's spirit safely to the other realm. Then they will bless Shoshani and we will return to the temple. She craves your comfort."

"And she may continue to do so. I do not wish to see her. She is a flawed vessel who continues to disappoint me," he snarled.

"Do not blame your lovely lotus," the priest chided. "Your children are too perfect, desired by the gods. Mere mortals are unworthy of their presence, so the gods take them early. Shoshani is not at fault, Pasha. She is favoured by the divine, as is Ahura. You should be grateful that the gods have granted you such gifts."

Nestat knew better than to contradict a priest, but his disposition did not improve and his reluctance to visit with his distraught wife and offer her soothing words did not change either. Thankfully, the newest arrival stepped in, offering Nestat a reprieve.

"I think I can offer her some solace and bring her a little peace," the young man said, lifting the package that he carried with him. Nestat frowned. The stranger appeared to be of the merchant or artisan caste, and he had spoken out of turn. To further his irritation, the newcomer was absurdly handsome and annoyingly enthusiastic.

"And you are?" the Pasha sneered.

"Oh, I'm sorry - I thought you would be expecting me, Master Nestat." The young man bowed apologetically, realizing that he had overstepped his place. "I am Riaz, eldest son of the apothecary. I bring to you the herbal infusion that was requested, to treat your honourable wife's grief and pain."

"I was expecting the apothecary," Nestat stated sternly. "Not an inexperienced whelp."

"My father measured and mixed the content, I promise you," Riaz said, "but he was summoned by the vizier. Otherwise he would have brought this here himself."

Nestat could not challenge this. He knew the vizier's needs superseded his own. He watched as the other priests filed into the corridor and began to make their way out of his home. Quiet anguished moans echoed from the room where Shoshani lay. When the priests were gone, Nestat faced the young man.

"Fine - you believe you can bring her relief, Riaz, you tend to her," the Pasha responded. "I have more pressing affairs."

"More pressing than Shoshani?" Ehsan asked. "Master Nestat, allowing Riaz into the birthing chamber would be entirely inappropriate, even if he is administering the concoction. He is no priest. If you won't go yourself, send Bassir to fetch one of her maids."

"It is only a birthing chamber if she brings forth life," Nestat spat.

"And Shoshani brings forth only death. My servants have better things to do with their time, and I'm loath to look at her. If Riaz wishes to volunteer his time, I have no objections. Make certain he knows the way out - for when he is done."

With that, the nobleman clamped his hand violently onto his serving-man's shoulder and they headed off down the hallway.

* * *

My throat constricts from time to time, due to the lack of moisture, but the slight wheezing that accompanies this discomfort is lost in the wind. The pain is so great that were I capable, I would weep, and I am a proud man.

That was my first mistake. The gods had made their will clear and I chose to spite them. I'm reminded of that every time a priest passes within my reach but I cannot touch them. I was reminded of that by the runes that adorned my wrappings when they first found me and laid me out for dead, while Hanif prepared the preservative bath. He knew the truth. He smiled at me triumphantly with vengeance in his eyes. He wanted me to suffer for as long as was possible and he knew the accursed prison that he had placed me in was worse than any man-made cell. This time, I would be the victim.

Part of the preparation process included extracting the organs before drying out the body and going through the rituals to properly store it. That would have killed me. That would have been merciful. Hanif, at one time such a gentle soul, wore a menacing expression as he made the cut that would have allowed him to pry my stomach, liver and lungs from my abdomen, but he purposefully left them there. He would not permit me the pleasure of dying. That sort of amnesty would have only been granted to an innocent man, and this was Hanif's means of justice. Instead, he stitched up the cut with the care of master craftsman, chuckling to himself as he did.

The worst part of that stage of my earthly hell was not observing Hanif's pleasure, or the stinging blade as it sliced through my flesh, nor the needle piercing my tender skin as he sutured and dabbed at the wound, but rather the soaking in the preservative bath after the cut was made. I could not scream and everything burned. My open eyes were on fire, my vision blurring from the brine, my skin tightened over my bones with every second that passed, but the greatest pain came from the incision, raw nerve endings exposed to chemical corrosion. I had never known a fiercer agony in my life. I believe that I shook involuntarily, a tremor running through my rigid body that would have been hard to miss. Had anyone other than Hanif been there to witness this, they would have known that I still lived.

He left me in that bath half as long as was necessary. He did not want overstimulation to numb me to the point of a loss of sensation. He wanted me to feel everything - everything. He used the remaining time to use subtle and constant force to slowly ease my limbs into a slightly different position. He wanted me to be as exposed and humiliated as possible, when

the priests came to carry me to my current resting place, where I could finish my dehydration.

That is how I ended up here, a desiccated husk and yet still barely alive. And aware...

* * *

Once Shoshani was fully recovered from her latest miscarriage, she had taken to making regular trips to the apothecary shop to fetch a drug that Riaz had told her would increase her fertility, but also make her body more accepting of the child that she would carry. That way, there would be more likelihood that she would bring it to term.

Nestat Pasha did not notice her weekly sojourns at first, still angry over the loss of yet another son, and growing bitter at the sight of her. It was not until one particularly warm morning when she returned from her trek with package in hand, her bronze cheeks flushed from the invigorating walk, her dark eyes sparklingly brightly with joy and a glow to her skin that suggested an improvement in health that he approached and questioned her. He felt a stirring for her that he had not felt in months.

"Where do you return from, Shoshani?" he demanded, but he actually reached out a hand to brush the dark hair from her beautiful face. He had not touched her in what seemed like forever.

"I come from the apothecary, my love," she beamed. "Riaz informed his father of our predicament, and he has gifted us with new hope. We must try again, dearest. This time I know it will work. The gods will answer my prayers – I am sure of it."

She hurried off to their kitchens, where she would have one of the servants prepare the brew. Her enthusiasm was so contagious that Nestat almost went with her, wanting to bed her again there on the spot. He licked his lips as he watched her perfect form move away, his desire for her reignited. His advisor, Ehsan watched on with some concern.

If Nestat had acted on impulse and pursued his lovely wife, perhaps what followed would never have happened. Instead, he resumed his seat beside the scholar.

"I told you trouble would come from allowing that young man into the birthing chamber. He has seen her at her most vulnerable, he prizes her now more than ever and he is attempting to charm her away from you. Young men are not known for their ability to control their urges." Nestat eyed his small owlish advisor.

"Nonsense – how would he charm her by increasing our chances of having a son? Such a thing would only bring us closer together. Besides, he is aware of our differing statuses. How can he compete with my wealth and power?"

Ehsan shook his head and sighed.

“Were it only that simple. Every man in this city yearns for Shoshani, and I can see two possible problems with Riaz’s relationship with your wife. For one, women are complex creatures. They are motivated by emotion, not logic. Logic would tell her that wealth and power are the most desirable things, but Riaz lifted her spirits during her darkest days and she might feel indebted to him. She might even believe that she now loves him, and she may have become infatuated with his pretty young face. You are not getting any younger, Pasha. Intellect would tell us that maturity and wisdom come with age, valuable traits, but lust would speak otherwise.

Even worse, your wife may decide that there is truth to your theory that your seed is too strong for her womb. She may be visiting the apothecary, not seeking a cure to your specific problem, but rather questing for weaker seed with which to fill her weak womb. Did you not see how bright her eyes were – how rosy her cheeks?”

Nestat played up taking great offense at the scholar’s words, and sent him away with instructions not to return again until the Pasha sent for him, but in fact, he feared that there was truth in his advisor’s words. The damage had been done. Ehsan had planted a seed of doubt that over the next few weeks blossomed into a full-fledged paranoia. Nestat took to following Shoshani at a distance and watching her transactions with Riaz from afar. They almost touched each other when they spoke; holding each other’s gaze ever so briefly, like they were hinting at some greater familiarity. Riaz would always flirt with Shoshani, and make her laugh. What bothered Nestat the most was the way that the apothecary’s son looked at his wife once her back was turned and she was walking away from him. He was hungry for the beautiful woman, Nestat could tell, and if the young man had not already defiled his wife, he certainly intended to, eventually. Ehsan was right.

Jealousy is a dirty beast, a vile serpent that rears its venomous head and entwines itself about a man’s heart. As the days passed, Nestat eventually convinced himself that the dirty deed had been done and that his wife had already cuckolded him with this common man. The Pasha would not stand for it. He would seek out Ehsan, and together they would devise an appropriate punishment for both the vulgar adulteress and her wretched lover.

* * *

I dream of rain, although I know it will not come. There is a reason why the priests chose this desert valley as the place to complete the drying process of the corpses – it has not rained here in over a hundred years. But I am not a corpse and I wish there were some way that I could convey this to them. I want them to recognize that just because something looks a certain way, it is

not necessarily so. How ironic. If I had not jumped to conclusions without further evidence, I would not be where I am today.

The priests are not the only ones who visit these sacred grounds. Those of the higher castes are allowed to come and visit with their departed loved ones. She comes sometimes to taunt me, bearing the babe in her arms. The one thing I could never claim as mine in life is now paraded before me, trapped within my pseudo-death. The last time she was here, she also showed me a ring, given to her by a suitor. She tells me that she will remarry. The child needs a father, after all.

Still alive, I will be betrayed for real this time, as someone else claims my wife and child as their own, before I am truly gone. She says that Hanif will continue to treat her, so that she will bear this new man many healthy children.

Then, when she is sure no one is watching, she spits in my eyes, a horrible reminder of the moisture I crave. As the saliva slowly oozes along my skin, the burning begins again along that one slimy trail, until the sun bakes it away once more.

But she is not my only visitor. Hanif comes as well. He is not high caste, nor is he a priest, but he has work to do here too, so he is permitted to walk amongst the dead. He makes a point of walking past me as well, every time that he is here.

"Murderer," he growls at me, quietly, so that nobody at a distance can hear, and while he does not obviously kick sand in my face, he steps in a contrived manner. Where he sets his foot, a layer of dry sediment billows up and coats my skin, adding tenfold to my discomfort as I breathe a small amount of the dust in.

"As long as I must live my life suffering for his loss, so shall you," he murmurs, before moving on.

I am paying for the evil that I wrought – and I will likely continue to pay, long after Hanif is dead.

* * *

Nestat should have been pleased when Shoshani announced that she was with child again, but instead he fumed. He did not openly display his ire, but let it simmer in the pit of his belly fuelled by jealousy. He was convinced that she had soiled herself with the apothecary's son. He was convinced that this child was that of Riaz.

Obsessed with this belief, he sought out Ehsan.

"This is not my child," the Pasha hissed when he met secretly with the scholar. "She has dishonoured me, and with a lower caste man at that. His inferior seed taints her womb. They must pay for what they have done – tell me how I should seek justice."

"Expose them," the owlsh man replied. "You may divorce Shoshani if she has committed adultery and you may choose a new wife. That was what you wanted."

Nestat grimaced, his lips white with tension.

"I have no proof. All I have is what I have seen with my eyes, and what I know in my heart."

"Hmmm – then you need a plan, one that eliminates both the bitch and the dirty dog that has sullied her. But you want a method that allows you to remain seemingly pristine – one that will not cast blame upon your good name."

Ehsan paused, contemplating the situation. After a few moments, he smiled and his brown eyes brightened.

"Do you have any reason for seeking out the services of the apothecary, other than the brew that Shoshani has been imbibing?"

Nestat nodded.

"There is a herbal mixture that I purchase to enhance the flavour of my favourite sweets. The servants prepare this for me during special occasions."

The advisor rubbed his hands together, pleased with himself at his own brilliance.

"That will be perfect. Direct your servants to prepare for a party that will celebrate your wife's good news. Have them prepare the dish, but make sure that Shoshani is given a first taste of the delicacy. We will need someone else to help us with this, someone whom you trust with both your life and your confidence."

"Bassir – I trust him first and foremost," Nestat insisted.

"Good, then we must have him join us for these discussions. There is much planning to be done. Be prepared, Master Nestat, to play the role of the grieving widower."

The festivities were announced and no one suspected foul play. It was not unusual for those in the higher castes to celebrate the coming of a child. Nobody questioned Nestat's request for his favourite treats either and it was arranged that Bassir would go to the apothecary's to request the blend of extracts of rose, almond, vanillin, apricot, and mint as well as oil of lemon and lime. The almond was especially important, as it would disguise the poison that Bassir would add to the mix, before handing off the package delivered by Riaz to the kitchen slaves.

The feast began and Nestat Pasha wove his way through the throng of guests, wearing a smug smile. Most thought it was a display of pride at his continued virility. Only Ehsan and Bassir knew why he appeared so happy, when normally he was a stern or solemn man. The guests gorged themselves on stuffed eggplant, olives and grape leaves, along with slivers of tender seasoned goat meat and morsels of flat breads dipped in spicy legume purees. Wine flowed in vast quantities and the musicians could

barely be heard over the buzz of the crowd. In fact, it was because of all of this noise that the screams of the servant sent to fetch the sweets almost went unnoticed. Shoshani, Nestat, and a handful of curious invitees rushed off to investigate the commotion.

They arrived at the kitchen to find one of the slaves there clutching the limp and lifeless body of the Pasha's only child, Ahura, to her breast, as she wailed and pulled at her hair. The mischievous girl had been unhappy at being excluded from the celebrations and had crept into the kitchen to steal sweets before they were carried into the party. She had no way of knowing that the treats had been poisoned and had eaten an excessive amount of them as a way of consoling herself for missing the fun.

Shoshani was devastated and took to her bed. Everyone expected the shock to bring about yet another miscarriage, but this time, it did not happen. Nestat was shaken by this horrible turn of events, but despite now finding himself mourning in earnest, he proceeded with his plan. Riaz was framed for the poisoning, accused by Bassir, who also claimed that the apothecary's son had been lusting after his mistress for many months, and that the young man had decided to eliminate her husband from the picture, but that his plot had gone awry. It was not difficult to find other low-bloods willing to claim witness to the flirtations between Riaz and Shoshani. The apothecary, Hanif, had little in the way of resources to fund his son's defence. By the time Shoshani's belly was growing round with her newest child, Riaz's head had been taken as punishment for the murder of little Ahura.

Nestat had debated the situation of the baby with Ehsan. The Pasha was still convinced that the child was Riaz's and not his own. He did not want to raise the adulterous progeny of a dead lower caste man, the child of a person now considered a criminal by society at large. Nestat had been hoping that the babe would spill from his wife's womb stillborn, as early and as easily as all of his sons had in the past. The fact that this one did not had him even more convinced that Shoshani had betrayed him. Since it was now clear that this child would go full-term, he had a new problem on his hands. He would have to find a way to rid himself of his soiled wife and Riaz's bastard.

Nestat had just settled into his chamber sipping at his mulled wine, awaiting the arrival of Ehsan to discuss his options when the tremors first struck. His muscles seized and the convulsions that followed jostled the goblet from his hand. The wine spilled from its bowl and seeped into the rug, as did the contents of his bladder and bowels.

As he shook out of control and his muscles tensed to the point where he could do no more than heave shallow breaths, Nestat realized that he had been poisoned as well, and he expected to follow Ahura into the realm of death. Unfortunately for the Pasha, that was not what happened...

The sun is hotter than ever today, with the heat rising in shimmering waves from the sand. I know now that it was Hanif who poisoned my wine, a deed arranged and enacted in conjunction with Shoshani. She revealed this to me, to add to my torment, upon her very first visit to this morbid valley. She also informed me that the baby that she carried with her, the son that she flaunts just out of my reach, was indubitably mine. Riaz had never laid a hand upon her, had never done anything more than cheer her spirits and offer her kind words. She has no reason to lie to me now. It must be true. She despises me for what happened to Ahura, and for what happened to Riaz. She suspected my involvement, trusting that Riaz would have no hand in murder. She managed to pull the truth from Bassir, tempting him with the promise of his freedom and amnesty in exchange for his confession. He told her everything, as much a victim of a guilty conscience as perhaps I should have been. But I wasn't, nor am I now. The only thing I regret is falling victim to the hands of vengeance. Hatred for me burns in her eyes as hot as the sands that bake my skin, but there is closure there – there is victory. She knows how I suffer, and she is happy to share that secret only with Hanif. Her grief has had time to simmer and stew and the sadness has evaporated, leaving only an anger as dry as my curled and papery shrunken flesh. She will find new life in a new husband and other children. She tells me this time that this visit will be her last. I will not have the pleasure of watching my son grow, and she will thrive in the satisfaction of knowing that I will certainly outlive her, trapped in this unforgiving cell of dehydrated skin, sinew and bone. Hanif, however, will not desert me. His loss runs deeper, and he is not invested in anything else that is new. He is a wily man who mastered the art of herbalism over the years. He had no problem finding the right drug, a very potent one that would paralyze but leave me just barely alive, one that he still doses me with, tucking a small wad of dried leaves into the pocket of my cheek whenever the opportunity presents itself. It is a plant with mystical properties that has allowed the priest's magic to adhere to me with greater strength and intensity.

"For Riaz," he says as he inserts the latest dose. Then he stands over me and smiles his vengeful smile, making sure that his shadow does not shield me from the sun. He'll continue these visits until he dies or until the priests decide that I have no more moisture left to lose. Then, they will seal me away in a dark tomb. I'll be deep below the surface, no longer exposed to the sun, but if I do ever find my voice once there, there will be no one around to hear my screams. I think that time may be soon. Today's heat is a particularly dry heat.

The moral is: Jealousy and greed plants a pricy pit.

JACK'S HORN

Neil Leckman

The boy sat out on the rock outcropping enjoying the sun's heat as it warmed his tired body. His clothes ragged, dirty, and worn hung in tatters from years of use. He was a slender lad, with blond hair, blue eyes and a mischievous smile that constantly played across his face as he looked out over the herd. The sheep wandered in small groups across the side of the hill finding food wherever they could. This was a barren place and it was a constant struggle for people to get by, and the sheep had it no better. Down below in the village people began heading out to work in the fields, hoping to grow enough crops for the coming winter. In the far distance the early morning mist was rising off of Lake Tanna, creating ripples that distorted the mountains, and then vanishing into the heat. In the woods farther up the hill behind him he could hear something stealthily moving around, and several times he spotted eyes watching him from the shadows. Smiling Jack reached down and picked up his time worn horn, and placing it to his lips blew into it.

Instantly down in the village everybody stopped what they were downing and looked up the hill towards Jack. They dropped whatever it was that they were doing and began running towards him. Placing the horn back on the ground Jack turned towards the woods, which were now silent and dark.

Thomas, who was one of the village elders arrived first, "What is it?" "Wolves!!" Jack said, pointing to the woods behind him.

Viktor arrived next, out of breath, looking around at the calm scene of the sheep grazing on the hill he turned to Thomas, "Again?"

Viktor turned to the others who were working their way up the hill, "Go back, it's another false alarm!!"

"Jack, that's the last time. We can't keep running up here every time you see a shadow. From now on you're on your own" shaking his head he turned and headed back down the hill behind Viktor.

Jack watched as they walked away talking to each other pointing back in his direction. When he was sure that nobody was paying any attention to him he stood up and walked over to the trees on the edge of the forest.

"I did just as you asked, I'm pretty sure that they won't come back now for any reason"

In the darkness of the underbrush Jack could hear movement, and the sound of snapping twigs as something made its way towards him. Bushes started shaking in front of him until they parted and the head of a giant wolf emerged and spoke.

"Well done Jack" the wolf says as he looks past Jack towards the village.

In the depths of the forest Jack can hear the sounds of other wolves moving towards him. The wolf in front of him is much larger than any he has ever seen before. It could easily bite him in half and swallow him in a couple of bites. As the silence between them grows Jack ponders how they first met.

The freak storm had hit the coastline south of Jack's village, destroying almost every boat tied up there. The day afterwards dead fish lined the coastline as far as the eye could see, and the smell was horrendous. It was obvious that the people were going to have to rely more on their crops this season than they had in the past. People had begun to talk about how bad the coming winter was going to be, and the possibility that some wouldn't live through it.

That was the same day that Jack first encountered the wolf. It seemed strange that it could talk, but when it promised Jack he wouldn't have to ever worry about going hungry again, well it had his attention. All Jack had to do was make sure that the villagers wouldn't come if the alarm was sounded. The wolf said that would give them time to take before anyone really knew what was happening. The thought of starving to death was scarier than the wolf, so he agreed to do it. Now, standing here in silence, in front of this giant wolf Jack wondered if he had made a mistake. Jack also realized he had never seen more than the wolf's head, which disappeared into the thickness of the bushes. It could be much larger than he originally thought, and now the sounds of other wolves crawling through the dense undergrowth grew louder, and closer.

"I promised that you would never know hunger again, did I not?"

"Yes" Jack said, nervously looking at the weeds and bushes near him that jerked as something hidden moved nearer.

"I always keep my promises Jack" he said as his tongue reached out towards Jack, who fell as he stepped backwards in alarm. The tongue kept coming, and as it reached farther the wolf's head split in two wet halves. Jack turned and ran towards where he had laid his horn, and behind him he heard the sound of trees snapping and bushes being crushed. Quickly looking back he saw that the tongue had grown and now was lined with little round, wet, suckers. Each one of them like a tiny mouth, opening and closing, and inside he could see rows of razor sharp teeth. Suddenly a giant head, much like that of a squid, rose out of the brush. It was covered in angry, swollen red sores that oozed a viscous yellow fluid. One of its large lipid eyes glared at him, and more tongues rose up and reached out for him. Below those eyes was a large mouth that opened into a black maw, from which a stench came of things long dead.

"Jack, I keep my promises" the mouth said as it lunged even farther out of the forest at him, and behind him Jack caught glimpses of other

creatures even more horrible. The sight of all those eyes, and hungry mouths drove him even faster towards the horn.

Reaching down Jack grabbed it sounded the alarm. Down in the village nobody even turned to look. Jack tried to blow the horn again, but it was too late, because Jack no longer had any lips. The wolf kept his promise though, Jack never knew hunger again.

It's true what they say about crying "Wolf" too many times. When you really need help nobody listens, if you don't believe me just ask Jack. Don't wait too long for an answer though.

The moral is: Be mindful not to cry wolf.

TWISTER SISTER

Tonya Lambert Kropp

Tessa looked at the clock in the corner of her office/workout room. It was one in the morning and she was terribly blocked, with the deadline for her story looming mere hours away. The best way for her to clear her head was to go for a run. The fresh air, sweat and blood flowing through her veins always helped her get the creative juices flowing.

Tess reached for her cell phone and sent a text to her best friend Macy. "Goin for run Hubbys asleep Writers block." The writer in her had mentally struggled with texting and its lack of punctuation and proper grammar, but she had decided it was sufficiently convenient enough for her to get over her "Grammar Nazi" ways.

The cell immediately beeped with a response. She knew that Macy was as much of a night owl as she was. "Not by urself! 2many weirdos, there in10."

Tess smiled as she went to the closet and pulled out her running gear. She didn't like to admit it, but running by herself late at night did give her the creeps sometimes. There were days that it was her only chance to get in a workout since her daughter was born, and she had went back to work at the newspaper. Still, she was always jumping at every little noise, afraid that a would-be mugger or rapist was hiding behind every shrub or parked car. She definitely felt safer with having a running partner, even if it was her petite and harmless-looking friend.

At 1:12, Macy arrived, her silky blonde hair ponytailed and wearing a black crop top and running shorts. The top was short enough to show a sliver of creamy, taut belly and an impossibly cute belly button. Tessa self-consciously pulled down her own too-small t-shirt she had received from participating in a local 5K before her baby was born. She wanted to hide her own abdomen, which still had a bit of a post-baby pooch and traces of stretch marks left over from her pregnancy.

She wondered if she would ever have a nice tummy like Macy's again. Hell, she didn't have one that nice BEFORE she was pregnant. No wonder Tessa's husband gave Macy "that look" that he never gave Tess anymore. He tried to hide it and act like he was looking at something else, but Tessa knew-she was the plain Jane compared to her gorgeous best friend. But they had been friends since they met in middle school, and Tessa was used to it by now (or at least had thought she was). "Ready to go?" Macy asked.

"Yep," Tessa pulled her mousy brown hair into a sloppy bun as she followed Macy out the door. The pair walked a bit before breaking into a

slow warm-up jog. Macy was one of those women that made running look effortless, while Tessa felt like she clomped around, huffing and puffing.

Tessa had started running again after her daughter's birth to get back into shape. Her mom had encouraged her to run track in high school, telling her that it would help her keep off the extra pounds that seemed to find their way to her chubby cheeks even as a teen. "You will never catch a husband with thighs like that," her mom had told her once. Those words still stung to this day.

Having a baby brought back some extra chub, and with it came Tessa's old insecurities. Running had helped her lose a few of the extra pounds, and seeing the changes in her body, and the seconds coming off of her speed at races, had boosted her self-esteem. That is, until Macy decided that Tessa's running looked "like fun" and started joining her.

At first, Tess enjoyed the company of having someone to train with for races. Then Macy caught up with her speed, and surpassed it. She would show up at races and breeze past Tess, looking like running was easy and fun for her. Macy's already-toned figure became even more magazine cover perfect. People had always asked Tessa and Macy if they were sisters growing up, because they were always together, and Macy always looked a little older because she was taller and had developed earlier. Tessa always figured people thought Macy was the older, more attractive sister. The girls went with it as kids, saying "Yes, of course we are sisters," and smiling at each other. Those were the days...

Tessa envied Macy's long, toned, tanned calves, and her ability to fill out a sports bra. Her chest seemed to be the only place she lost weight easily after childbirth and breastfeeding had left her bustline looking deflated and sad. Maybe if I looked more like Macy, my husband would do more than look over the Wall Street Journal before turning off the bedside lamp at night, Tessa told herself. Then maybe he would look at me with lust in his eyes, the way he looks at Macy.

Tessa felt a wave of uncontrollable jealousy swirling inside of her chest as she looked at Macy's new white and hot pink running shoes, which perfectly set off the tan in her muscular legs that was glowing in the dim streetlights lining the side of the road.

"What is that sound?" Tessa asked.

"I don't hear anything," Macy replied, looking bored as she kept pounding the pavement of the sidewalk. They were passing Tessa's favorite stretch of road, a couple streets away from her house. It was a long, straight stretch of sidewalk beside an abandoned church parking lot. She always felt fast moving down that block.

There was a rustle in the parking lot of the old church. It started as a few solitary leaves that blew in the breeze. The wind caught them and they started spinning in a circular pattern. Tessa slowed her punning pace and watched them, entranced. More and more leaves and pinecones and dirt

were recruited into the mini-cyclone which continued to grow larger and larger. At first there was no fear, only fascination at the small spinning tornado that left the rest of the surroundings untouched. That is the most bizarre thing I have ever seen, Tessa thought as she stopped running to watch the twister keep growing and growing as it inched closer to the two girls.

"Hey Macy, it is headed right for us!" Suddenly Tessa realized that she needed to stop staring and start running, not to clear her mind or lose weight but to get away from the enormous cyclone heading in their direction.

Tessa realized it was not coming after her, but headed straight towards Macy, as if it was aiming right at her. No matter which way Macy ran, it was following her. And yet Macy somehow seemed oblivious, as if she didn't know what Tessa was talking about.

"Macy, look out! It is gonna get you!" Tessa screamed, but it was too late. The cyclone picked up her friend, her substitute sister, and Macy was caught in its vicious throes. Macy looked back at Tessa in horror as she was spinning in the cyclone, her mouth gaped open further and further until Tessa swore it would open backwards and swallow Macy's whole head from the other side. Blood spewed out from the cyclone towards Tessa and splattered on her purple running shoes and the running watch on her outstretched hand as she had reached out to try to help her friend. "MACY!" Tessa screamed as the cyclone engulfed her best friend, and satisfied, it imploded and disappeared.

Tessa woke up, gasping for air as she sat up in her bed. "Hey, are you okay?" Her husband asked. Tessa's breathing started to even as she calmed down. "Man, must have been a hell of a dream! Oh well. My alarm clock goes off in a few minutes anyway, might as well get up.

"A dream..." Tessa repeated, sighing. "Of course. It just seemed so vivid."

"What time did you get in last night, Tess? I heard you leave but guess I was sleeping hard when you came home. Olivia woke up once and you were still gone, so I just gave her some of the milk I thawed out of the freezer."

Tessa reached over and grabbed her phone from the bedside table. She looked at the last text in her inbox. "Not by urself! 2many weirdos,there in 10"

"Macy!" Tessa had a strange feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. Did she run last night with Macy? Was there really a mini tornado that swallowed up her friend? How come she didn't remember coming home or getting in bed? Tessa dialed her best friend's cell phone number frantically.

Her husband, who had just come out of the bathroom, shouted, "Whose phone is that ringing? It's coming from the closet in your office."

Macy started to climb off the mattress and saw something peeking out from under the edge of the bed. Her running watch. Complete with a splattering of dried blood.

She jumped out of the bed and ran to her office. Her husband stood there, looking at her in a way he never had before. His mouth was agape, with a look of horror and disbelief. It reminded her of another face she had seen not long before....one that was about to be swallowed up by an impromptu twister...

Tessa looked from her husband's face, which had lost all of its color, to the closet behind him, where she could still hear Macy's cell phone ringing. She saw her bloody purple running shoes put away neatly in the closet. Behind them sat one of her best friend's white and hot pink shoes, and still inside was a bloody stump of tanned, taut, muscular calf.

The moral is: Envy and anger shorten one's life.

CHAMELEON

Lori Lopez

"Men are such lizards!" declared Paige's best friend Coral. "Most women think they're pigs, but they're actually closer to reptiles: scaly, low, and cold-blooded." She was comforting Paige over the discovery that Paige's boyfriend was a liar and a two-timing louse. The women sat on the sofa in Paige's apartment, united by sisterly hand-clasping.

"You're right," sobbed Paige, sniffing, dabbing grief-flooded eyes with a wadded tissue. "I can't believe he would treat me this way! I trusted him! I tried so hard to consider his feelings!"

"Lizards have no feelings," Coral disparaged. "Only instincts and compulsions."

"I thought he was different. He really had me fooled," Paige wept.

"He was a chameleon," asserted her friend. "You couldn't have known."

"I should have. I was bitten by a chameleon when I was small. So I bit the chameleon back, and it had some kind of environmental toxin. I nearly died," Paige divulged. "They thought I was allergic or something."

"Wow. And then you wind up dating a human version!"

"The first time I found out Brad was cheating, I forgave him. We had a misunderstanding. He didn't know if I still loved him. When I told him I did, he didn't tell me that he was seeing someone else," Paige related. "I had to find out the hard way — stumbling across their comments and hearts on his social page!"

"Let it out, sweetie," her friend soothed. "I know. That stinks."

"He was saying he loved me at the same time!"

She blamed herself, exonerating him from guilt. Then learned he had continued to date the other woman behind her back while they were talking things out.

"The guy's a lizard and a skunk. You're better off without him."

"I feel lost without him," Paige deplored.

"Hey, no man is worth losing yourself over!"

"I can't help it. I'm still in love."

"Shake him off! You deserve a man, not a reptile."

"Thanks, Cor." The women exchanged a hug.

"I've gotta get home. Will you be okay?" Coral stood, gathering her coat and bag.

"Yes, don't worry." Paige smiled as her friend departed.

Once the door closed, she sprang into action and tugged an armload of outfits from her closet. She intended to confront the philanderer and demand an apology for his behavior.

Choosing a dark teeshirt, slacks and boots, donning a black raincoat, she strode out the door with a purposeful gait. In her heart she was secretly hoping he would get down on his knees and vow that he loved only her. And she might, again, try her best to believe it. She knew that she shouldn't — couldn't — and bade herself to be strong. Coral was right. She deserved better.

The pants felt snug. Insecurity flared, overcoming indignation. Had she gained weight? No wonder Brad was unfaithful. Also her fault. Ripping cloth, like a zipper undone. Great, she must be so pudgy her seams were splitting!

The evening air made her shiver. She should have dressed warmer. Wisps of breath frosted before her. A shadow seemed to follow her on the sides of buildings as she marched along.

In this part of town the streets were quiet. A few times she turned to glance behind, aware of a furtive rustle. Nobody there.

Paige reached a building and pressed the security buzzer. An exterior door unlatched. She ducked into the vestibule. What was that swish? Nervous, she peered out at the empty street and sidewalk.

An elevator lifted her to the second floor. Rapping on Seven-B, the woman prepared herself to be brusque and authoritative. A female answered the knock, throwing off her approach.

"Yes?" The woman appeared to have been crying.

Paige hesitated, undecided between fleeing and asking for Brad.

"If you're selling something, I'm not interested." The space narrowed as the door was closing.

"I'm looking for Brad." It came out rather abrupt.

The girlfriend hesitated. "Are you from his construction company?"

Construction? He told her he owned an ad agency! Feeling numb, she shook her head.

"Well, he isn't here. We had a fight. I caught him cheating. He's probably with her. I was about to go home. I don't even know why I'm telling you this!" The woman continued to shut the door.

"I'm the other woman!" Paige announced.

"No you're not. I saw her picture online."

A stab of pain lanced Paige's gut. There was a third?

From her wounded expression the woman surmised, "You must be the one he left a few months after we met. This bimbo is new. He's been seeing her while claiming to love me!"

The corridor began to spin. Paige couldn't believe what she was hearing. He was worse than she thought!

"Brad never left me for you," she gasped. "We were still together."

"That's a lie! You're just jealous!" the woman bitterly maligned. "He said you were a green-eyed monster!" She retreated to a table, scribbled on a notepad with a pen. A shredding sound. "Here." She presented the slip of paper. "I found her address on his laptop. I understand why he broke up with you! He said you were clingy, and kind of unstable! But you can ask him for me why I wasn't enough!"

Paige accepted the piece of paper, cheeks coloring, her sense of outrage rising.

Then found herself on the sidewalk. She couldn't remember exiting the building. She placed a hand to her abdomen; her stomach felt leaden. She glanced at the address. It wasn't far.

Idly she unraveled auburn strands of hair from a button on the raincoat's cuff. Her feet moved of their own accord. The soles of her boots were sticky and made little peeling noises, like she had stepped in paint. She stood before an apartment and knocked.

This woman's eyes were swollen and wet, a familiar sign.

"I'd like to speak to Brad!" Paige belligerently professed.

The blonde's mouth hardened. "Why? Who are you?"

Apparently, Girlfriend Number One!" snapped Paige. "Although I can't be sure!"

"You mean there are more?" The woman was surprised. "I knew he broke up with someone after we fell in love, but you're not her. She had reddish-brown hair."

Paige's lips tightened. Her stomach lurched. "Is he here?"

"No. I suspected he was messing around and followed him. I watched them kiss when she opened her door. He tried to tell me that she was a client for his legal firm," the woman shared. "I'm not an idiot! I told him. We had a fight. I pushed him away and now he's with her."

"Where does she live?"

"I'll show you! This should be fun!" The blond lady grabbed a jacket and ring of keys then pulled her door shut, bolting it. She charged down steps, unperturbed that she was in slippers, an old sweater and baggy sweatpants. Or that her face and eyes were puffy, her straw-like mane uncombed. She was too mad to care.

Dark locks blew, obscuring Paige's face. She brushed them behind an ear as she silently trailed her rival.

"You shouldn't feel bad. It wouldn't have worked. You don't seem his type!" Girlfriend Number Three sneered. "You're too mousy and mild. Brad prefers bolder women from what I can tell. But I'll never comprehend why he needed more than me!"

Paige digested the insult, her countenance heated, jaws clenched, hands curled in the pockets of her raincoat.

Number Three stormed up a stoop to the entrance of a residence. She hammered the door with her knuckles. "Open up!" the woman brassily

shouted. "I've brought someone who thinks she's your girlfriend! Another girlfriend, that is!"

The door was flung wide by a fourth weeper. The two women exchanged words, accusing each other of stealing their boyfriend.

"He belongs to me!" the tawny newcomer raged. "I've forgiven him for the swimsuit model. He's a photographer. He has to take pictures of beautiful women. She was all over him and he couldn't help himself. But we're getting back together! We have a date tonight. So whatever you want, you can forget it! He chose me because he loves me, and you need to accept that! You and that other witch!"

"Listen, you hussy, Brad was never over me!" the blonde snarled, her fists balled.

A hoarse growl.

The woman in the doorway became frightened, gaping past her adversary. The blond lady swung about. Her mouth dropped.

A lime-toned reptilian beast raked taloned digits across the rigid females, who tumbled inside the threshold. The creature — bulgent eyes covered by green-scaled armor rolling in separate directions; a ridged spine straining material; a tail flicking beneath the hem of its coat; shedding torn boots — stalked after them and slammed the door. Screams and hissing were muffled.

Twenty minutes later, a cute guy with coiffed sandy hair and sharp duds came sauntering up the steps bearing packages of take-out food. He rang the buzzer, a smug grin plastered on his lips, then waited expectantly. A slight frown marred his forehead when the door wasn't answered. "Deb?" he called, giving the buzzer several impatient jabs. "Debbie!" Miffed, he pranced down the stoop and strutted away. "No problem!" he loudly dismissed. "I don't need you!"

The door discreetly budged. A dark form, matching the night, slithered out to hasten after the fuming male.

Brad paused at one point and turned. Squinting, he almost thought he perceived a hint of motion.

"You're miiiiine!" a throaty voice eerily husked.

"Who's there?" Annoyance subsided to uncertainty when nobody emerged from the gloom. "I'm a kickboxer!" bluffed the creeped-out cad. "Screw with me and you'll regret it!"

"Sso will you!" the whisper sibilantly promised.

Abandoning his aggressive posture, Brad whimpered and started to run. He dumped the fast-food containers.

Mocking laughter echoed.

Brad arrived at an unlocked gate and cast it aside. He sprinted through a courtyard to a ground-level apartment. Ringing the bell he nervously hailed, "Hey babe, my investment client cancelled the meet so I'm all yours!"

A face peered between curtains and jerked back. He waited, pounded some more, and paced in front of the unit while keeping a wary eye on the gate. "Come on, Trish, let me in!"

The door was belatedly yanked ajar. Trish had changed to a party frock and applied cosmetics. "Brad, what a surprise!" she greeted, as if she didn't know he had been there for ten minutes.

"About time! I could've been killed out here!" He barged rudely by her.

Trish chided, "It isn't my fault you showed up with no warning! I had to look decent! I'm not one of those tramps you used to date!"

Before she could seal the doorway, a rush of momentum and venom surged past, ruffling her dress. She spun, mouth flapping, to behold a lizard-like mutant. The thing raised a lethal mitt armed with wicked claws and slashed her face, leaving five gashes. Her scream was cut off when the opposite limb swiped her throat, carving crimson trenches.

Paige stepped over Trish's crumpled corpse. Her beaded scales glistened with blood.

"No, no!" Brad shook his head in terror, eyes popping.

"I've missed you," the chameleon rasped.

"What? Who — who the heck are you?" stammered the man of her dreams, his visage baffled.

"Don't you recognize me? The green-eyed monssster?" she taunted.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about," the heartbreaker spouted. "You're a lizard! I'm standing here talking to a lizard!"

Paige's attention was drawn to a mirror on the wall. She drifted in front of its glass surface and gazed at her reflection. The texture of her hide, now a deep forest green, sparkled as if jewel-studded. A crest adorning her head made her feel like a queen. "I'm sssso beautiful," she marveled.

The reptile swiveled to regard her mate. He was less magnificent, rather drab in comparison. And yet her heart was fond of the schmuck. Sashaying forth, cornering him, a thick tongue slurped the rim of her mouth. "You don't even know which one I am, do you?" she challenged.

Trembling, he wagged his head.

"It's me. Paige." She indicated the dead woman on the floor. "You made me do that. Made me kill them. We had sssomething good. There wasss no need, for any of it. We could have been happy. You ssspoiled it. You transssformed me into thiss."

The man spurned, "You're crazy! Do you think I could have loved a freak like you?"

Paige grimaced at the derision. "I gave you everything," she sadly stated.

Brad hollered as the atrocity hove near, poised to kiss him — or perhaps bite his head off. He grabbed an abstract wood sculpture from a small tabletop and bashed the creature's skull. She, it, howled stumbling.

Releasing his club, Brad lunged for the door. The lizard-woman grabbed his leg, pinning him. Claws sank into flesh. Shrieking, the man flailed to extricate himself. He tore loose, and committed the fatal blunder of glancing back.

The reptile's gross lengthy tongue shot out to grip his face and reel him in. Paige realized he couldn't love her. He had never loved her the way she loved him, the way she deserved to be loved. Instead, the despicable lowlife had dragged her down, compelled her to lose her dignity and pride, her humanity.

There was only one thing left to do: ensure he couldn't shatter any more lives!

The chameleon hauled the scoundrel inside her craw, headfirst, kicking and screeching.

Authorities would be stumped by the homicides. They would question a surviving ex-girlfriend, and search in vain for the prime suspect who seemed to have escaped justice.

Chameleon scales were collected from one of the crime scenes, bagged and tagged then filed away as irrelevant. Blood and tissue on a statue couldn't be identified. It was either lizard or human; the sample must have been contaminated. And the murder weapon, some sort of five-bladed device, couldn't be located. Circumstantial evidence pointed to the missing boyfriend.

Chatting with Coral one evening, Paige informed her that she had finally gotten Brad out of her system. "He still leaves a bad taste in my mouth though," she admitted.

"I'm just glad he didn't — you know — get you too!" Coral gestured as if slicing her throat with a finger. "I worry that he might return. I hope they catch him!"

"I'll be fine. He's long gone, I guarantee." Paige complacently offered more cocoa. They were seated on her sofa.

Coral declined. "I have to get home. Busy day tomorrow," she sighed, placing a mug on the coffee table.

"Okay, well, you know I'm here if you need to talk."

Coral was having boyfriend issues. "Thanks. He's such a leech!" she wrathfully criticized. "Siphoning everything out of me! Sapping my strength and patience and love! My money too! Sometimes I'd like to give him a taste of his own medicine!" She laughed. "Did I ever tell you about the time I was swimming in a scummy pond when I was small and got covered by bloodsuckers from head to toe? It took an hour to peel them all off, and I lost consciousness!"

The women hugged. "Don't let him reduce you to his level," warned Paige, her tone solemn.

"I was kidding! I won't actually become a leech, okay? You've been watching too many old horror films!" Coral scoffed.

"I guess that must be it," Paige agreed, wearing a peculiar smirk.

The moral is: Don't lie and cheat or it won't be sweet. A jealous heart will break itself. Last but not least, Never let others turn you into a monster! (This is especially good advice if you happen to hang out with vampires, werewolves, or zombies.)

TAGGED

Nate D. Burleigh

"Just about done." Kathy rattled the can of spray paint and added the finishing touches. She stepped down and took a better look. Something didn't seem right. She picked up a can of royal blue and a can of hot pink spray paint and with the fluid motion of a dancer she added her "tag", Little k. "Perfect," she said.

Even with her tag added she couldn't feel it, and she so wanted to. No matter what people said about how infamous her graffiti had become, if she didn't feel it, it wasn't worth shit.

Kathy stuffed the unused cans of paint into a duffel bag, folded up the ladder, and headed for her friend Joel's. As Super at the apartment building, he'd been gracious enough to lend her a storage room for her tools.

After storing her equipment she walked home. Quick and quiet she climbed the fire escape ladder. She shared an apartment with her seventeen year old sister, Casey. Who'd earned the nickname, Ice, for being so cold.

"What the hell, K?" Ice asked.

Kathy crawled into bed next to her.

"It's four in the morning," Ice said

Kathy draped an arm over her little sister. "I had some work to do."

"How did it come out?"

"All right. I guess."

"Good. Now shut the hell up and go to sleep."

Ice didn't have to say it more than once, because Kathy had drifted into a deep sleep.

* * *

She found herself standing in front of her painting. Again and again her eyes were drawn to the left shoulder. It rippled with striated muscle. Something didn't look right. The visage wasn't the nightmare. The missing piece to the puzzle is what haunted her.

A massive arm burst from the concrete in front of her. It wrapped its mammoth hand around her neck and squeezed. She kicked and the ladder crashed to the ground. It pulled her close to its face. Concrete dust blew out from its bull like nostrils as it exhaled to life, its eyes glowing red. "Finish me." Its growl resonated deep within her soul.

"K! K! Wake up, K!" Ice yelled.

Kathy opened her eyes. "I...I'm up," she said.

"What the hell? Kathy?"

"What are you squawking about."

"Look at the sheets."

Kathy sat up. A quick shriek escaped her throat. Her pillow, sheets and blankets had spots, dribbles, and streaks of blood across them. She remembered the nightmare and felt the back of her neck. Her hand slid against warm fluid. "What did you do to me?" She glared at Ice.

Ice handed her a damp towel she'd retrieved from the bathroom. "Not a damn thing."

Kathy dabbed at her neck. Four distinct puncture marks stung as she caressed over them with her finger tips.

* * *

"So what do you think about the dream?" Kathy asked as they ate breakfast the next morning.

"I'm not sure. Maybe you need to finish it, like it told you to. Where did you say you got the idea for this one?" Ice asked.

"A bookstore downtown. Wanna come?"

"Sounds like a hoot." Ice rolled her eyes.

The girls took the bus across town. A bell clinked as they entered the dark shop. Kathy went to the section where she remembered seeing the book. She rummaged through several shelves. "It's not here, Ice. I can't find it."

"Let's ask the owner. Maybe they sold it," Ice suggested.

They approached the front desk. A single candle glowed within a crystal ball on the left side and on the right sat a two foot tall Chinese gong. A mallet dangled from the gong by a string. Ice struck the shimmering metal. "Bwaaaang." The sound echoed through the shop.

"Just a damn minute," a voice hollered from somewhere behind a doorway covered with a beaded blanket.

An Asian man emerged. The screaming florescent colors of his Bermuda shorts were blinding. "What?" he asked, scratching his belly through his wife-beater tank top.

"I'm looking for a book."

"Whole shop's full of 'em. What you looking for?"

"It has a black leather cover with a pentagram on the front," Kathy said.

"That book..."

"Yeah."

"It comes and goes."

"What do you mean it comes and goes?" Ice said, irritated.

"Has a mind of its own, that one," he said.

"I don't understand." Kathy's brow furrowed.

"Why don't you go look again." He pointed to the back of the room.

"Fine. I'll look, but I checked every shelf back there."

"Just go," Ice said.

Kathy stood on her tip-toes. The book sat on the top shelf between two books she knew she'd checked before. She slid the book off, catching it as it fell. "Found it!"

The blood-red pentagram bubbled through the leather as if it were carved into the book creating a bleeding wound. When she opened it a rush of wind blew through the shop. Several items on various shelves dropped to the ground, including the crystal ball with the candle inside.

The little man yelled something in a language she didn't understand.

Kathy flipped through the fragile pages until she found it. A shrill of goose flesh ran up her arms. She heard whispering in her ear and quickly turned, thinking it might be, Ice. But Ice remained at the front desk helping the man pick up shards of glass.

The demon on the page grinned at her. The caption beneath read:

Asmodeus—Prince of Vengeance.

Her depiction had been spot on, except for the left shoulder. She gave herself a V-8 slap to the head. "That's it. I know what's missing."

"Good, let's get out of here," Ice said. "This place gives me the creeps." She turned and looked at the shop owner. "No offense."

"Just go," he said, cursing as he swept up the remaining glass.

Ice opened the front door of the shop and tapped her foot as Kathy made her way from the back, stopping to look at several trinkets on the way.

"Be very careful," the man said.

Kathy set the book in front of the aged Asian. "Why?" she asked.

"Those who cause evil are the first to be overwhelmed by its ruin.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Kathy asked. She glanced down. The book had disappeared. "Where ..." She looked up and only saw beads swaying back and forth.

"C'mon, K. Let's roll. So?" Ice cocked an eyebrow as she held the door open for Kathy.

"I know what's missing.

* * *

At midnight, Kathy set her equipment down in front of the graffiti mural. Using acrylic paint, she set to work. When she finished, she knew she'd achieved perfection.

Ice shined the flashlight while Kathy worked. "That's all that was missing?"

"Yeah." Kathy admired the raised tattoo image of three pentagrams in an upside down pyramid.

A car came screeching around the corner. The blue and red flashing lights blinded Kathy. Ice darted into the alley. The police cruiser let out three short wails of its siren. Kathy leapt from the ladder with a crash.

"Hold it right there, girlie. If you move, I'll shoot." a male officer said.

She vaguely made out the silhouette of a police officer on each side of the car through the brights. They walked into the light, guns drawn. "Get on the ground," the one on the left ordered.

Kathy obeyed and knelt.

"All the way down, flat on your face, arms out to your sides."

Kathy sprawled as directed.

"We finally caught the infamous, Little k," a raspy woman's voice said.

"Yup," the man said. "You know how much money you've cost this city, Missy?" He knelt in the center of Kathy's back and handcuffed her.

The large black woman holstered her gun, knelt next to Kathy and patted her down. "You got any contraband or weapons on you?" she asked.

"No. You're hurting me." Kathy winced.

The female officer stood her up. Both cops had their backs to the wall. The sound of concrete cracking startled Kathy.

The cops screamed.

Kathy whipped around.

The demon had them by their throats, hoisting them several feet off the ground. They opened fire into the concrete wall. The demon spread his arms out, slamming the cops into the wall on either side of him. They kept kicking, screaming, and shooting. Asmodeus swung his arms together and the officers heads collided.

Kathy screamed as the shower of brain matter and blood drenched her.

Asmodeus dropped the limp bodies.

Wide eyed, Kathy watched as he melted into the wall as if he'd never moved. Still grinning. Someone tugged on the back of her jacket. "We have to get the hell out of here!"

"Ice?" Kathy asked, still staring at the wall and the insufferable grin of Asmodeus.

"I... I can't believe it killed them," Ice said, her voice quivering. "We have to go. When these two don't check in, they'll send more."

Still in a daze and disoriented Kathy thought she heard the rocks breaking again. Her heart raced.

"Holy shit, K," Ice yelled and pointed at the wall. Chunks of concrete broke free and smashed to the ground in front of the wide eyed girls. Ice pulled Kathy toward the police car.

"What are you doing?" Kathy yelled.

Ice opened the passenger door and shoved Kathy onto the front seat. "We're getting the hell out of here."

Kathy looked up. The demon's head, torso, and one leg had fractured from the concrete wall.

Ice hopped into the driver's seat. The keys were still in the ignition. Tires screamed and smoked as they sped backwards through the empty parking lot. When the car hit the road, she whipped it to the side and slammed it into drive. She jammed the accelerator to the floor and the car lunged forward.

"Where can we go?" Ice glanced frantically side to side.

"Go to Joel's," Kathy said.

Ice fiddled with a bunch of buttons and finally got the blue and white lights to turn off. She slowed to the speed limit and turned down Joel's street.

"What?" Kathy heard Joel say through the intercom outside the front door of the building.

"It's, K. Can me and Ice come in?"

They heard a loud buzzer and the front door opened with a click. The girls scurried up the flight of stairs. Kathy knocked.

Joel opened the door. His blossoming beer belly hung over his boxer shorts. He ushered them in. The room smelled of stale beer and cigarettes.

"Do you ever clean this dump?" Ice asked.

With his ass-crack peeking up from his sagging boxers, Joel rummaged through papers on the couch and came up with a pack of cigarettes. He flipped one into his mouth and plopped onto the matted cushions. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" he asked, lighting his cigarette.

"I don't even know where to start," Kathy said and proceeded with the story.

When she finished, he sat in silence, puffing on his cigarette. Kathy looked at Ice. Ice shrugged her shoulders.

Joel opened a pizza box sitting on the coffee table in front of them. The piece of pepperoni pizza looked like someone had stepped on it. Something black clung to it. Joel flicked the cockroach off the pizza and shoved half of the piece into his mouth. Ice ran into the bathroom and retched.

"What's wrong with her?" Joel asked.

"Long day," Kathy answered.

"Looks to me..." Joel said with the other half of the pizza in his mouth. "...like you conjured this Assmo...what's his face through your graffiti."

"No, shit," Ice said from the bathroom door.

"So. What the hell do we do?" Kathy said, worry creasing her features.

"My thought..."

Kathy leaned forward.

"...is that you two can take your scrawny asses out of my apartment. If this things hunting you, I don't want you anywhere near me."

"What makes you think it's hunting us?" Kathy asked.

"Well, for starters, it came out of the wall when you ran away, right?"

"Yeah." Kathy fidgeted.

"Then it's hunting you, or her." He thumbed toward Ice. "Like you said, it's the demon of vengeance. Maybe it wants revenge on you for waking it up?"

Kathy's ears heated up. "Do you have anything constructive to tell us?"

Joel hesitated and said, "Go back to the book shop. Pester the old man until he tells you how to get rid of the demon. You could also read more of the book and see if there's any way to get it off your back."

"You've been a great help, Joel." Ice sneered.

"Not a problem." He scratched at his inside thigh.

They heard a crash and the building lurched.

"Earthquake!" Joel ran to the front entrance and braced his arms against the door jams.

"I don't think so," Ice said and pointed at the front door.

In the vented window above the door, Kathy saw the demon's dark-gray and blood-red horns. She pointed frantically at the door. Joel stood firm.

Ice whispered, "Get the hell away from the door."

"Why?" Joel asked.

Kathy pointed at the door. A loud pounding sound came from behind and the door crashed into the apartment with parts of the wall still attached. It hit Joel in the back. He fell face first onto the floor in front of the girls. Both arms were stretched to the sides and snapped at the elbows. Blood spurt from the left arm. Joel screamed.

The beast ducked his horned head and stepped into the room. He stood on the door. Bones snapped as he shifted weight.

Joel's screams died down to a few whimpers. They heard a pop, like someone had smashed a pumpkin on a street corner. A gush of blood and brain matter shot out from under the door. The girls screamed.

Asmodeus grinned.

Ice yanked Kathy's hand, pulled her into the kitchen, and opened a window. "We have to jump," Ice said. "Now!"

Kathy stared at her creation. The gargantuan horns scraped the ceiling.

Still grinning.

"Jump, now!" Ice hollered.

Kathy crawled onto the ledge and leapt, aiming for a shrub. Branches snapped and leaves scattered. She landed on her back, staring straight up at the window. Ice had one leg dangling from the window when she let out a gut wrenching scream.

"Ice!" Kathy yelled in horror.

Blood oozed from the windowsill. An agonizing few seconds passed. Kathy's heart raced and tears streamed down her cheeks.

Ice stuck her head out the window and tossed Kathy the keys. "Run!" The horrified look on Ice's face settled into a sinister smile as he pulled her back into the apartment. "Come on!" Ice yelled.

A few grunts and squeals came from the window above and then silence. The building shook again. Kathy turned, her right ankle gave out, and she dropped to her knee.

Another crash came from within the apartment. No matter how much it hurt, she needed to get up. With one last look at the window, she turned and limped toward the police car. Searing pain shot through her calf and thigh with every step. She heard another loud crushing sound, but didn't look back. She knew she had to make it to the car or she'd never get to the book store.

The impact of something hitting her in the back propelled her head first into the sidewalk. The object bounced off of her and landed several feet away. Dazed, she looked up. Blood from a large gash in her forehead streamed into her eyes. All she saw were blurs in front of her. She furiously wiped the blood away with her jacket sleeve

She crawled forward. Every inch revealed more and more of the object lying in the gutter. When she reached it, her worst fears and nightmares were realized. The left eye had blood and vitreous fluid oozing from the socket. The other bright blue eye stared out from beneath strands of jet black hair coated with blood. Kathy screamed, "Ice! No! Casey!" She held her sister's head in her arms as if she were cradling a baby.

A deep roar came from behind. She looked back. His bull hooves cracked the pavement with every step. Kathy wrapped Casey's head into her jean jacket and limped quickly to the police cruiser. She set the severed head of her beloved sister on the passenger seat.

"It's OK, Ice. We'll get the hell out of this." She started the cruiser.

"Fifteen, come in. Fifteen, this is dispatch. Come in." Kathy glanced at the CB radio, debating if she should pick it up or not.

The chatter on the radio got more confusing. First they were talking about the stolen police car and where it had been seen. Then there were frantic calls about an unidentified, thing, terrorizing a neighborhood. Kathy knew exactly what that thing was. She also knew that if she didn't ditch the cop car soon, that thing would kill her. She headed to the book store.

She parked in an alley behind the bookstore and hid Ice behind a dumpster. The sign read, 'closed'. She pulled her t-shirt off, folded it into a thick square, placed it against the window, and slammed her elbow into it. Glass scattered in all directions. The only sound, the hustle and bustle of the city exploding to life.

She reached through the busted window and unlocked the deadbolt.

"Take one more step and I blow your damn head off," she heard a familiar voice say. The old man stepped out from behind the beaded blanket. "You," he said. "I know why you here."

"You do?"

"Yes." He put the shotgun down on the counter.

"You woke him and now he pissed off."

"How do I get rid of him? He's wreaking havoc on the city."

"Have to ask the book. It different every time." He pointed to the back of the store again.

Kathy sighed and searched for the book again. When she found it, she turned it to the same page. It didn't say anything about how to make him go away. Then she looked in the glossary and found an entry for reversing conjured spells. She turned to page 142 and read that the demon needs to be de-conjured by doing the opposite of what brought it forth in the first place. She thought very hard about how she'd done it. The quiet realization staggered her. She hobbled back to the front of the store.

"You figure it out?"

"Yeah. Do you have any paint thinner?"

"Does this look like a damn hardware store?"

"Fine. Where can I find some."

"There's a paint shop up the street about three blocks. You learn lesson?" the man asked.

At the expense of two cops, her best friend, and her sister, she knew the answer to that question. The words rang in her ears, "those who cause evil are the first to be overwhelmed by its ruin." She nodded, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"Then go. He need to rest. It not the apocalypse yet." He threw her a clean tank-top.

Kathy slipped into the shirt. "What is he?"

"A soldier to lead the army's of hell. He bring angels to their knees." An er of excitement built in his voice. With that, Kathy left.

A block down the street, a small crowd gathered around a shop window.

"Holly shit!" Kathy said. She watched the TV in horror. He'd flipped over several police cars, a swat van, and was in the process of destroying a tank. She knew what had to be done and moved on, limping toward the paint shop.

"How much paint thinner can I get for twenty-bucks?" she asked the man behind the counter. His striped polo said, Dean, in the upper left hand corner.

"About three gallons," he said, propping his elbows on the counter.

Would that be enough to destroy a demon with the girth of a muscle car? She wasn't sure. "Have you seen the news today?" she asked.

"No. What's up?"

"Do you have a TV in here."

"In back."

"You have to turn it on, then I'm going to ask you a huge favor."

Dean reluctantly went to the back room and turned on the TV. "Holy shit!" he said. "Are you kidding me?" He came back to the front of the store. "It's a hoax, right?"

"Nope. I'm going to tell you something, promise you'll listen and not say anything until I'm finished."

"I guess," he said.

She told him the magazine add version of the story. Dean sat back in the stool behind the counter, took off his hat and scratched his balding head.

Kathy looked at him. "I think the paint thinner will destroy it, but I don't think three gallons will do."

Dean didn't say anything. He turned and went back into the room he'd been in before.

"Oh. Come on," she said.

He returned with a set of keys in his hand, turned and locked the office door. "Come with me." He smiled.

They gathered a load of one gallon cans of paint thinner. "I think I know where they are, but it's about five miles from here and you'll never get there with your foot," he said. "I'm parked out back."

They took Dean's 1969 Dodge Super Bee with dual spoilers on top. Kathy bounced around in the back seat as they sped through alleys and side streets. She worked diligently to prepare for the fight. The car skid around the corner of South Penn Square and South Broad Street. Gunfire rang in the distance. Several explosions rocked nearby buildings.

Dean said, "When we get there, you stay in the car and I'll take care of it."

"No way," she yelled. "I don't know if you can do it. I created it; I think I have to be the one to destroy it."

"Fine, but you can't do it alone. I'm coming."

"OK." She continued preparing the equipment.

The car screeched to a halt in front of a medium sized office building. Dean jumped out and pulled the compressor from the trunk. Kathy handed him the first canister of paint thinner and he hooked it into the machine. He pulled the cord and the machine roared to life.

"Come here," he said.

Kathy limped over and Dean hoisted the compressor onto her back, securing the straps.

Shouting and gunfire grew louder the closer they got to the roof. They opened the door. A helicopter with rows of missiles lining the undersides of the wings, flew over. A moment later they heard a hail of gunfire and several more explosions.

"You don't think we're too high?" she asked.

"No. We should be good."

Several men leaning over the side of the roof fired their rifles toward the street below.

"That thing won't go down," one of the men yelled.

"Ya think?" the other one answered.

The sound of the compressor caught the attention of several of the snipers. They turned and said something to each other and then one of them got up.

"You can't be up here." He had his hand on the but of his pistol.

"I think I can stop it," she yelled over the sounds of war.

Dean pulled the man to the side and talked to him. The two men returned to Kathy.

"If you think that shit will work, go for it," The man said. He led her to the edge of the building.

On the street below the demon-prince Asmodeus poised for another attack on a tank that had come around the corner. His skin shimmered like the scales of a fish in the sunlight.

The sniper pointed at Asmodeus. "You made it, you kill it."

Dean had hold of Kathy by the safety bars of the compressor machine. He'd hauled up two more canisters of paint thinner that she'd prepared on the way over. "Let it rip," he yelled into her ear.

She held the compressors nozzle in her right hand like a flame thrower. She pressed down on the button. It sputtered at first, then shot out in a steady stream.

The fluid hit the beast. He roared and looked up.

She continued spraying.

Asmodeus moved out of range. His right arm withered to a bloody stump.

"Holy shit. It worked."

"Raise it, so it arcs over him," Dean said.

The new angle showered the thinner over its target. Asmodeus roared as his skin melted. He smashed his massive body into the side of the building. Dean fell over Kathy, still clinging to her harness. She latched her arm around the escape stairwell. The building rocked again and a National Guard's man and the other sniper fell from the building.

Asmodeus caught the camo-clad soldier by the throat. He pressed the man together like an accordion and then quickly spread his arms apart. The man tore in half, blood and entrails scattered across the street.

"Kathy," Dean said, his voice strained.

She turned her head. Dean dangled, struggling to keep his grasp on the paint compressors metal guard. The machine still clicked and whirred. The hose and nozzle swung back and forth next to Dean. A quiet rip let Kathy know she didn't have anymore time.

Dean looked at her with pain in his eyes and let go.

Asmodeus leapt into the air. His razor sharp horn pierced Dean's back and exploded through his chest. Asmodeus shook his head and Dean's lifeless body crashed into the side of the building. Asmodeus crouched and jumped towards Kathy.

Terror stricken, Kathy hung on for dear life as Asmodeus took hold of the fire escape. The ladder broke away from the building. A large hand reached over the side and caught the machine on Kathy's back. The metal staircase crashed to the ground with the demon still climbing it.

The Sniper smiled at her and hoisted her back onto the roof. "I'm sorry about your friend," he said with a solemn look on his face.

"I'm sorry about yours."

The man nodded. "Watch this," he said and picked up his cell phone. "Now." He pointed to the end of the street where a truck came to a screeching halt. The men had what looked like cans of paint thinner in their hands.

Kathy knew this wasn't going to end well. Their paint thinner had no effect on Asmodeus. He leaned over, grabbed the underside of the truck and lifted. It spun several times in the air. Men were crushed by the truck when it landed and others were ejected into the street.

The sniper's cell phone rang. "Yes sir. I don't know sir."

"Tell him I'm the only one that can destroy it," Kathy said.

"She said she's the only one who can destroy it. Yes sir...Yes sir...I'll tell her." He slipped the phone back into his pocket. "He said we need to get you directly over the creature..."

"Demon," she interjected.

"Whatever the hell it is. The Apache is coming to pick you up."

Her stomach churned at the thought.

The wind from the chopper blades blew straight down on Kathy. Two men repelled from the helicopter. They unstrapped the machine on her back, turned it off, and threw it into a basket that came down with them. The sniper helped load the paint thinner.

Kathy settled into the harness. The blades of the helicopter were deafening and the wind seared her eyes. She didn't dare look down as they drew her up. When she reached the chopper two men pulled her in, unstrapped her, and gave her a headset.

"What's the plan," Kathy asked.

"Were going to get low, just over its head. Then you can pour the paint thinner," the pilot said. Another soldier strapped her into their harness.

"You've got to be kidding me," Kathy said, realizing she was going to be dangled out the window.

"Nope. Not kidding. We'll open the canisters and hand them to you. All you have to do is lean out the door and pour."

"Fine," she said.

The helicopter banked left and made a wide arc. A constant barrage of grenades and rockets kept Asmodeus busy while they made their way around. "Here we go," the man next to her said and lowered her out the opening.

Asmodeus batted grenades and rockets out of the air.

The harness swung Kathy several feet from the door. The chopper hovered over Asmodeus. He screamed in agony as she poured the first canister. Skin melted as the fluid flowed over him. He leapt several hundred feet the other direction, out of harms way.

"Hold on," the pilot said as he pursued.

The soldier handed her a canister with something taped to it. "Push the button, count to two and drop it," he said.

The device taped to the canister looked like a lighter sized brick of clay with a glowing red button in the middle. Press, one...two...drop. A second later the canister exploded and the paint thinner caught fire and rained onto Asmodeus. Muscle tissue, veins and arteries were exposed. They handed her another paint thinner bomb.

Asmodeus knelt as if in silent prayer. He looked up. Half of his face had melted to bone. One of his horns completely vanished. His hooves had both become one with the concrete. He breathed heavy and bowed his head as if he anticipated the next bomb.

She'd done it; she'd beaten the demon that killed her sister. As she dropped the next canister his back exploded, throwing chunks of meat and sinew. Two large black wings emerged. The bomb ignited and the wings were speckled with holes.

The power of his wings blew burning police cars into the surrounding buildings and threw up a cloud of dust and debris as he lifted off the ground.

"Holy shit, it's coming," the pilot said.

The helicopter roared to life and in an instant they were moving strait up. One of the men had hold of Kathy's jeans as she bounced around. She could see Asmodeus, one arm outstretched, damaged wings flapping wildly as he took chase.

They handed her another canister and said, "Push the button and drop it, don't count."

She did as she was told. The canister exploded above Asmodeus. He came flying through the fire with more damage to his wings and his other horn had melted, but he wasn't giving up chase. She dropped another one. He avoided it by veering right, but started spinning wildly as one of his wings split in two. The next one did the trick, it exploded in Asmodeus's face. Both wings disintegrated. He fell, crashing through the roof of an office building below.

The helicopter dropped her off in the street in front of the building. From somewhere deep within she heard an awful moaning sound.

Some soldiers came over and strapped another paint sprayer to her back. One of the men lead her to the basement. Asmodeus lay on his back in a bloody heap. Several concrete pillars had collapsed on top of him. His one eye flickered on and off like a Christmas light. With the half mouth he had left, he grinned at her.

She felt sorry for him as she started spraying. He wailed and as he melted into nothing, he looked at her and moaned, "Master?"

Kathy fell to her knees, tears streaming down her face. Why did he call me--Master?

* * *

Kathy stood across the street, admiring her latest work of art. The deep-red eyes seemed to follow her no matter where she stood. "This time, it will be different," she said. The concrete in front of her began to crack and fall away from the wall.

Asmodeus grinned.

The moral is: Those who cause evil are the first to be overwhelmed by its ruin.

AND WHO CAN SAY WHAT WILL BE DELIVERED?

Ken L. Jones

He was alone and he hated to be alone. He was old and sick and could barely get around anymore and he should have been used to that but he wasn't. He missed his wife but he really wished he didn't. He loved her but most of the time he wished he didn't because in the truest sense of the word she wasn't worthy of his love. He painfully forced himself out of his orthopedic bed with his cane and creakingly began to go about his day. Then he remembered with a groan exactly what day this was. The new refrigerator was going to be delivered. The realization of all this made him cuss out loud. Why had his stupid thoughtless wife left him hung with this when he was so old and sick while she gallivanted off to Arizona to see her even more stupid and thoughtless mother?

Now supposedly his mother-in-law had just suffered some kind of a stroke but he wondered about that because she had been sent home even quicker than he had been when he was recently in the hospital with just an enlarged heart and cellulitis. So how sick could the old battle axe really be? If she was really ill or impaired somehow she would have a hard time proving it to him because "Hurricane Wilma" as he called her hadn't missed a beat in dominating her weak-willed youngest daughter nor slackened one bit in interfering in their marriage. Everything about this latest road trip to "mommytopia" had irritated him and it had come out of nowhere. His wife hadn't even discussed it with him. He had a tight deadline on his latest collection of horror short stories to meet and she was his typist so he would probably blow that and then there was this whole thing with the refrigerator being delivered today. He had hang ups about the whole topic of refrigerators and his wife knew it. His dad had owned a business where he repaired and sold refrigerators and he had yoked his young son to it from the time he was about eight until he was twenty-two and had gotten married. Every moment of that time when he wasn't in school he was working like a serf for his dad in his business often times doing heavy lifting up several flights of stairs many times a day. The years he did this left him a cripple on a cane with a brittle back that constantly went haywire on him at the worse possible times.

All of this was oppressing him greatly as he hobbled around his modest house making himself a simple breakfast of microwavable salt-free clam chowder, toasted whole wheat muffins and a diet Dr. Pepper and then the storm started. Now normally he liked the rain especially when he was

creating a moody tale of horror but this wasn't the kind of storm that he liked. This was the kind that flooded whole towns out and the kind that brought the decrepit hillsides of Southern California down on top of people's houses wiping them out in mere seconds. One more thing to worry about on a day that was already overcrowded with too much melancholic nonsense already.

Finishing his modest meal while he watched Regis Philbin on channel seven he then set about tiding up the house for the impending visit of the deliverymen all the time wondering if they would come after all through such a hellish down pour. "Well it wouldn't have stopped my old man but then he was like the post office that way," he thought to himself ironically as he looked out his bay window at the ever worsening deluge. He had never seen anything like it before except in an old James Whale Frankenstein movie and something about it made him even more depressed and mad at his wife than he normally would have been. He should have been working but how could he? On days like this he didn't even try because the horror of his own personal existence was so overwhelming that he couldn't come up with fiction that could top it.

Then he went into one of his darkest places where he mediated on his wife and all of her sins against him. He had to admit that he still loved her and found her attractive but he wondered if that outbalanced all of her many other defects. She had always placed her idiot mother and her other relatives above him and his needs even those of his career. In the over forty years that they had been man and wife he had often wished that he had never heard of her before but never more than today and that feeling grew more intense with each new sheet of rain with each ever increasing tympani roll of thunder and with each new bone rattling crack of lightening.

He wasn't quite sure how long he had been staring into the abyss of the storm's darkness but it had been a while. Then suddenly there appeared the last thing that even his deep and warped imagination could have summoned up. It was his father's old cherry red service truck circa 1975 with his dad driving it and someone whom he recognized immediately as his younger self in the passenger's seat. Now he knew that this just couldn't be because of the fact that his dad had passed away from cancer back in 1978 and the truck in question had been long ago cubed in some auto wrecking yard.

He had to admit that he was happy to see his beloved old man again no matter how that was being accomplished. Seeing his younger self was a little less joyous to him as he was reminded once again of what an awkward comic book loving nerd he had been back then and he winced as he noticed the ill-fitting Spiderman tee-shirt that his younger self so proudly wore. As he finally valiantly wrapped his head around the fact that this was actually happening he wondered why and what it all exactly meant but before he had too much time to puzzle all this over his father's massive knuckles were

beating a drum solo on the his front door. Hobbled over he composed himself for a moment and then opened the door.

"Hi Ken's Refrigeration," said his father. Since no words would come the old man on the cane just gestured for them to come in and they did. They had the new refrigerator with them all strapped down to a large aluminum dolly and both wore rainwear and were heavily soaked. He invited them to take off their raincoats and to throw them on his sofa and they did so thanking him.

Then a strange thought occurred to the old writer when he asked his father "What's the date again today? I need to fill out a check for you."

"February 13th," his father replied.

"And the year?" he asked.

"Why 1975 of course," his dad said looking at him as if he wasn't quite all there.

"That's what I thought, I'll leave you two gentleman to your business. I'm going back to the bedroom to make out your check," he said hurrying to the back of his house as fast as his crippled frame would carry him.

He quickly filled out the amount on the check and was glad that it had his wife's name on it instead of his. He put the date on it that his father had told him that it was. Then he grabbed a notebook that he had by his bed that he used to scratch down dream notes and story ideas on and he set about writing the most important thing that he would ever commit to paper. He started off explaining who he was and why he knew what he knew. Then to firmly establish this astonishing fact he detailed several key secrets from his early years that only he knew and which he had never shared with another living soul. Then he gave himself some career advice hoping to spare his younger self several wrong turns in that area. He also advised his younger self to take the following March 22 off and to stay home in bed and fake the flu because that would be the day that he would do irreparable harm to his back while lifting a particularly heavy refrigerator up a very rickety flight of wooden stairs.

Finally he wrote down his most important admonition. You're now dating a girl and he wrote down her full name and you really love her and you had a fight with her last night and tonight you are going up to the taco stand she works at to break up with her and you will take back your mother's diamond engagement ring from her. You'll go off for a couple of days and be so miserable that you'll plead with her to come back to you but you really shouldn't do that. Just break up with her and make sure you tick her off so much that she will never want you back ever again.

Then he went into minute detail about why this was such a good idea. Finishing all this up he folded the note in half and slipped it inside of a plastic bagged comic book which was his very first published work from back in 1985 and which had kicked off thirty years of him being a published author. Then he headed back to his living room. When he came back out he

saw that his father had already installed the new refrigerator and had already put the other very ancient appliance on his dolly in the center of the room. His dad was passing the time by wiping raindrops off of the new Kelvinator that he had just installed with the ever present purple wiping rag that he had always carried in his rear uniform pocket.

The writer's younger self however as was his bad habit was studying everything in the old man's place with a little too much interest.

"Hey mister," said the young man. "Why do you have two TVs in the living room? There's that flat one over there and then this one on the desk with this typewriter gizmo in front of it and I notice that you have these shiny discs in these plastic cases and this really tiny record player. What are these albums by the Beatles? I thought I had everything they ever put out before they broke up but there's all kinds of stuff here that I've never even heard of and what's this about a John Lennon memorial album he's not dead."

"The Lennon thing is a sick joke given to me by one of my friends who has a very warped sense of humor. All the other stuff comes from Japan son top secret stuff. I work for a big company over here and I'm road testing some new technical innovations to see how they might do stateside," the old man lied.

"Say pal I see you like comic books from that cool looking Spiderman tee-shirt you're wearing. I'm into that kind of thing too. As a kind of a tip I want to give you something rare for your collection," he said reaching for the comic book that he had brought out from the bedroom.

He was glad as he gave it to his younger self that his credit wasn't on the cover and he smiled to himself as he now felt assured that his entry into the writing game would occur much easier and faster than it had before. Then the check was accepted. His younger self thanked him for the strange looking comic book he had given him. They put their rain coats on and then they departed into the strange storm that had brought them leaving the old writer feeling slightly out of breath and nauseous. Only the invoice that was so familiar to him prevented him from passing this off as some dream or hallucination caused by the many medications that he took on a daily basis.

Then his anger at his wife once more dominated him and as he thought about it he somehow even managed to blame her for what had just happened too if only for the fact that she had made him go through all this weirdness all by himself. But then he was heartened by the idea of what he had just been able to do and he congratulated himself for what he had pulled together and the brilliant way he had tried to influence his younger self but had it worked? He strained hard to try to remember what his younger self was like and what kind of a world view he had had back then but little came to him of any real value because all that had been so many life times ago.

Then he began to feel stranger than he had ever felt before as if he was somehow slowly rotting away and his heart had never felt this weird either. The best way he could describe it was that it literally felt like it had been split down the middle. Then an all encompassing terror shot through him as he realized that his scheme to dump his wife had not worked at all. Barely able to move a muscle now he tried with all his willpower to try to figure out what could have went wrong back then by remembering the exact details of that long ago night in question.

He had walked from his parent's house to the taco stand that she was the manager of. He had yelled for her to come out into the alleyway behind it through the backdoor that was standing open. She had been chopping a large block of cheese with a huge sharp meat cleaver which she was still holding in her ... oh my God he shuddered. He had forgotten all about the meat cleaver that she held in her hands that night so long ago and he realized with a grim finality that she must have lost it when his younger self had come on even harder than he had before he met his older self and that she must have planted that razor sharp implement square and deep into his heart ending his life that night forever before it had even got much started. He would have laughed at the irony of it all but his vocal chords were no longer working. He would have laughed at how forgetful he had been but his formaldehyded lips had long ago shriveled up and turned all leathery. Yes indeed he now understood that there were something's worse than a bad marriage and that in the last forty years that he had been a rat feast in some cheap wooden coffin there had been nothing but time to think about that fact over and over again. As all of eternity stretched out in front of him he wondered if any kind of forgetfulness would ever come to soothe him or to give him peace or was it indeed as some claim that hell was nothing more than remembrance without ceasing?

The moral is: Be careful what you wish for.

LET THE DEAD BE DEAD

Kevin L. Jones

It was the eve of Halloween and it was said that during this season of misrule that the dead could speak. At least that's what Rick and Jennifer fervently hoped as they sat upon the porch of the cursed house. They brought with them a cheap cardboard Ouija board in hopes of communing with the other side. They had tried out the necromancing device at Jennifer's apartment but had gotten no results. So she suggested that they give it another go in a more sympathetic setting. So they had gone to the house on Sleepy Hollow Drive. This home was supposedly the most haunted house in all of the Inland Empire, maybe in all of southern California. No one knows for sure how many people had died on this property dozens maybe more. All anyone knew for sure was that anyone who tried to live there either died or disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The young couple had tried to get inside of the house but found that they could not gain entrance. The front door and garage had some serious locks on them and all of the windows had thick sheets of plywood nailed securely over them. So they had decided to hold their Ouija board session on the house's front porch. They didn't think that they would have to worry about the neighbors objecting to their presence on the abandoned property because most of the surrounding dwellings were vacant too. It seemed that no one wanted to live too near to the ill-omened home. All the town of Yucaipa was dimly lit and gloomy after night fall. The city was too cheap to put up many street lights but Sleepy Hollow Drive seemed dark and foreboding even by Yucaipa standards. Rick and Jennifer used some green glow sticks that they had bought at the local 99 Cent store to light their way once they reached the unlit and abandoned home. Before they got started with the Ouija board they drank a few beers that Rick had swiped from the frig full of booze that his dad kept out in their garage.

After taking a few long gulps Rick looked around fearfully and muttered "Let's take off this place is freaking me out."

Jennifer sneered at her boyfriend for a moment before replying. "God you're such a little bitch. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Yeah you're right I'm just trippin'", Rick smiled sheepishly. "Let's get this over with."

They put their hands on the board's planchette and Jennifer began to ask the Ouija questions. "Are there any ghosts here?"

The planchette was drawn to the yes in the corner. Jennifer smiled excitedly. "How many?"

The board began to spell out a word Rick and Jennifer said each letter out loud as it was pointed to. M-A-N-Y. Jennifer looked up at Rick and could see that his face was full of concern. She asked the Ouija another question. "Who killed you?"

The board began to spell out another word, H-O-U-S-E. Jennifer felt exhilarated. She had never experienced a psychic occurrence before. She licked her lips nervously before continuing. "When will we die?"

The Ouija spelled out, T-O-N-I-G-H-T.

Jennifer asked in a soft voice, "Which one of us?"

The board began to spell out yet another word, B-O-T-H.

Rick picked up the Ouija board and tore it into four pieces. He grabbed the planchette from his startled girlfriend's hand and threw it into the bushes.

He shouted, "This whole thing's stupid. Let's get the hell out of here."

Rick took his girlfriend by the arm and was about to lead her off the porch when he saw a vehicle approaching. He could tell that it was a cop car. Not wanting to get busted for underage drinking and trespassing Rick grabbed his girlfriend and quickly led her around to the side of the house. As they entered the backyard everything seemed to grow darker as if they had strayed into another world. Rick didn't think that they had been spotted by the cop so they were safe for the moment. Jennifer reached into her pocket and fished out another glow stick. She bent its middle and shook the plastic rod. The backyard was partially illuminated by its pale green light. They took in their surroundings. The grass was yellowing and went up to their knees. There were several blighted fruit trees nearby that seemed to be gently stirring even though there was no wind. Rick could see several parts of half eaten possums and cats strewn about the yard. The air was pungent with the smell of animal droppings. It was as if they had wandered into some unseen beast's lair. Jennifer put her hand on Rick's shoulder and pointed with the glow stick towards the extreme end of the acre wide yard. They could see a man standing there. He appeared to have a dog on a leash. The unknown person and his pet began to move towards them. Rick thought to himself that it must be one of the neighbors or some bum that was squatting on the property. As the stranger grew nearer Rick tried to come up with an excuse for their presence there but none came to mind. He couldn't seem to focus. All he could think about was the strange sickly sweet odor that filled the air. The aroma was soon forgotten when the stranger stepped into the green light of Jennifer's glow stick. The night before Rick had watched the Living Dead film festival on TV but Romero's creations paled in comparison to the apparition that now stood before them. The undead thing wore a tattered orange prison jumpsuit. Rick could see that its decaying arms were covered in cheap looking homemade tattoos. The thing's jaw had rotted away and it hung by a scrap of meat from the left side of its face but for some reason the dog whose leash was held by the zombie

seemed the more threatening of the two. The beast was a huge brown pit bull. Its fur was filthy and matted. Its ribs protruded hideously through its flesh as if it had not eaten for a very long time. The sickly looking dog made a revolting retching noise and vomited up a huge puddle of blood filled with human body parts on the ground. Jennifer screamed before fainting as Rick turned and fled for his life leaving his girlfriend where she lay. Rick quickly made his way to the front yard and felt relief wash over him when he saw that the police car was still parked out front. The officer stood on the front lawn shining his flashlight into the bushes. Rick screamed at him for help but the policeman acted as if he couldn't see or hear him. Rick walked over to the cop and tried to touch him. He began to sob pathetically as his hand passed through the officer's arm. Rick turned around when he heard a loud creaking sound. The house's front door was now open. The yard was suddenly filled with a strong gust of wind that seemed to be blowing towards the house. Rick could feel himself being pushed towards the open doorway. He fell to the ground and clawed at the dirt in a feeble attempt at preventing himself from being drawn in but it was no use. The phantom winds were too powerful and Rick was swept into the abandoned home where the old dwelling devoured his soul.

No one ever knew what became of Rick and Jennifer but it was said on still nights that passersby could hear someone gently weeping in the home's empty front yard. All but the most foolhardy shun this cursed house for the dead are not at rest here and never will be.

The moral is: let sleeping dogs lie.

I AM VICTIM

Rob M. Miller

The ally was typical. It sat long, dark, and bleak, collapsed underneath a cloud-filled soot-covered night's sky, from the air looking like an elongated, straight-lined incision—an infected cut.

Trash bins, large and small, syringes and probably a billion cigarette carcasses, not to mention the dog-and-whatever-else-shit, filled its entire length. Past the first 15-or-so feet, no clear line of sight could be made into its depths, and no vehicle had any hope of entering its maze. Piss and mud-garbage-puddles, along with scattered patches of broken glass sat about as anti-personnel mines warning off all pedestrians. The city must've forgotten about the place, as it had so many others, as if the lofty urban-managers in power had simply said, 'Screw it.' Or, perhaps the owners of the two buildings that shared the alley's borders hadn't paid their waste bill in the past thirty-or-so years... say since 2003, preferring to have their own pseudo land-fill in closer proximity. Noise came from the alley-adjacent sidewalk and street: blaring horns, curses, flirtations, whore-hounding pimps, sirens from futile efforts of succor, as well as the street talk of excited teen-agers, full of hope and spunk, feeling foolishly-secure in their burgeoning freedom, as if they were adults... as if they were really prepared to take on the night. No sounds came from the long alley. But if one were to linger, they might start to hear little things: the rustling of styrofoam-junk being blown about by a careless wind, or the mewling perhaps, of cats in heat, the scampering of vomit-eating rats, and maybe a subtle, subliminal warning of: Abandon all hope, all ye muthus that would enter.

* * *

He lay limp over the top of an old crate, a rusty nail from the semi-rotted box imbedded painfully in his stomach. Some of his shattered teeth were visible to him on the ground, eerily easy to see in the faint light, looking like the hand-thrown toss of some shaman's bones, enthusiastically prognosticating even more pain to come.

He didn't expect any rescue, knew in fact, there would be none.

There never was. Not for him.

Never for him.

What did amaze was how aware he could be. One would think, that with his very unique nervous system, with his one-of-a-kind neuro-set of synapses that he wouldn't feel what was being done. Unfortunately, one would be wrong. He felt it all.

True, he kept a certain sense of distance, but just enough for him to function, a kind of omni-awareness that couldn't be described. Sufficient to say that nothing escaped his notice. Not the crying children of Borneo, and not the piece of scum masturbating as he watched the show.

His show.

"Don't quit," a young curly-haired man called from where he leaned against a brick wall. "Make him squeal... make him fuckin' beg and squeal."

"I don't think this piece-of-shit can talk," an Italian-looking greasy-haired youth called back. "Hell, I'm getting' tired of workin' the bastard." The man glanced at the broken, wickedly-pointed broom-handle in his hand, threw it down, then started massaging his aching forearm, all the while watching the body-slimed piece of wood as it rolled into a goopy pile of oily-looking water.

Then, with a disgusted look on his face, and with an award-winning amount of boisterous hawking, he spat out a sizeable blob of phlegm onto the broken man's back.

Curly nodded in approval at his friend's display of contempt. Then an idea hit, one fostered by anger and the throbbing bulge in his pants.

"Fucking piece of garbage. Hold his goddamned head up. He looks thirsty."

"Got it, meego," Greasy answered. It took only a moment for him to walk to the side of where the semi-nude man lay sprawled over the top of an old packing crate. Reaching down, he seized the toy's hair and snatched his head up.

Still, he wasn't satisfied. He hadn't made the man beg; he'd only broken his body. The meat's glassy-looking eyes said so. "Get ready for a splashing, you fucking freak."

Curly was ready. He'd wasted no time moving to the front of the freak's held-up head.

"Yeah, baby, I'm buildin'... I'm geeet... t... t... tin' reeady... yeah, that's it. Ohhh, yeah." Though the smack-smack-smack of his beating, pounding hand echoed weakly throughout the alley, it was more than audible enough for the both of them to enjoy, the freak, too, if he wasn't totally lost in shock.

Greasy couldn't help himself.

He fell into his friend's cock-beating rhythm, jerking the toy's head in tandem. "Yeah, that's it, STAIN! Get ready. It's commin' to the top. Cummin' for YOU." Greasy – in time to the humiliation – banged the man's head on the crate.

"Ohhh ... baby ... yeah!" Curly felt himself building. Soon. Any minute. "Fu... fuck... fuckin' CHRIST." Curly, eyes glazed with hate, let fly a massive glob of hot-load jism all over the man's face.

"You son-of-a-bitchin' dog," Greasy yelled, half-dropping-half-

slamming the toy's head. "You got some on my hand. You, ASSHOLE."

"Don't get mad. Friend's got to share, right?" Curly laughed as he packed his tool away.

Greasy wiped his hand on what was left of the toy's tattered T-shirt. "What the flying-fuck is wrong with this guy, anyway?"

Greasy stood with a stupid 'I-dunno' look on his face.

They didn't get it.

Usually when they went to have a good time, they knew they were going to be in for some real choice-cut begging.

But not from this guy.

Not tonight, not from the moment they'd first jumped him.

They'd been eye-balling his ass for a couple of days, seeing him around the hood, periodically talking with people, or they with him. Asking for chits and shit, they'd guessed.

Just being a bum wouldn't have necessarily caught their attention. There were plenty of those. They'd had plenty of those, along with others, more up-scale, that they'd used ... rolled, murdered.

This guy had been just right.

Made for them somehow.

Deserving.

A freak.

From the moment they'd seen the man's albino-skin, their wheels had started turning. Then, when they had gotten closer and seen the rest, the guy's fate had been sealed.

The man's eyes were colorless, and he had scars all over his face and hands, jagged, torturous lines that criss-crossed themselves, almost like a spider-web, as if he were some kind of savage from New Zealand or something. Weird. The world didn't need freaks like that.

Snatching his ass had simply been a matter of timing.

"Maybe he's mental," Greasy offered, lazily walking around, pacing in a half-moon circuit, looking at the silent, dying piece of freak-shit before him.

"Don't know. Maybe. He's sure as hell's something..." Curly paused a moment letting his last word trail off. Then louder: "Probably right. Just off somewhere, gone in his mind. Sailing on a lake, or something."

"Maybe so. But not for long. I got something for him. Gonna be sailing down to hell in a minute." Greasy unzipped his pants.

"You gotta be shittin' me. Whatchya think you're doing, anyway?"

"What's it look like? You had yours, now I'm gonna have mine."

Curly couldn't believe this shit. "Go for it, bud." He stared, hands crossed, with a thin, wicked grin.

Greasy glared at the man's bared buttocks. He couldn't really see the man's anus. Not enough light. Just a bit from the lone glow-globe they had brought and stuck on the side of a battered, low-hanging fire-escape.

What he could see wasn't pretty. Just fun. He had worked him over pretty good with the broom-handle, jagged, splintered edge leading the way, shoving it in-and-out with a fervor surprising even him. The damage had been a kick. He'd seen it, done it, many times before: chunks of meat coming out, blood-soaked, shit-smelling—fun.

But with this guy, he'd felt something else.

Anger.

He didn't know why. Strange. But now his lust was afire, could hardly wait to stick it to this guy ... in him. Teach the motherfucker his place.

Greasy shoved down his baggy pants. He never wore underwear. Then, as an afterthought, he said, "Check the guy's pockets. Maybe he's got a rubber."

"Done." Curly fumbled through the pockets of the large Army field-jacket he now wore, that he'd taken from the toy when they'd jumped him only a half-hour earlier. "Nada, bud. But hold a minute, will ya?"

"What for?"

"This, meego," Curly said, pulling out a small baggie from his khakis. "This shit here," Curly pointed with his chin at his buddy's stiff wood, then at the toy's ass, "is too fuckin' wild to watch straight."

"Gimmee some of that," Greasy said before breaking out in a short-stepping shuffle toward his friend, his body moving carefully to not trip over the pants around his ankles. Getting to his bud, he held up a fist, thumb-side up.

Curly poured the contents onto Greasy's index finger. "Nothing like a little BLUE to get you pumpin'."

"No shit." Greasy bobbed his head to a silent cadence as he moved the powder around in some semblance of a line. Times like this, he was glad he couldn't smell anymore. Made alleys like this bearable. But thank God, he could still suck-it-up. "Yeahhh. Now that's the shit." He snorted the blue-colored crystal-powder up his ruined nose. "Whoooo!" he yelled, immediately feeling the stuff hit his system with all the damn strength that made it the rave-of-the-age.

"Mother-fucking-awesome!" Curly yelled, finishing his own snort. "Now go and get it on, baby. Let the Greeking commence."

Greasy shuffled back to the toy, stared at the mess he'd made, and spat. "Fuck. I'm going to end up ballin' a cheek. What a mess." Bending down, he pulled a clip-it blade from his pants pocket and flicked it open. Snap. Standing, he then grabbed a hunk of the toy's T-shirt and stuck his blade in. A few cuts later, he held a swatch of dirty cotton and quickly worked to daub some of the goop, just enough to make the way clear.

"Careful now. Don't want to catch nothing."

"So fuckin' what," Greasy answered, slicking his cock with some

spittle. "Somethin' starts burnin', I'll just go down to the clinic and get a nice dose of one-shot-cures-all."

Watching his partner getting into his work, and with the BLUE really kicking in, Curly's heart started to pound, and he felt his own 'Charlie' coming back on the rise. There was something strange about watching the toy getting it. They had really torn the man up, and they weren't done. But it was like ... like nothing they could do would be enough. Something about this dude just sparked him off, made something inside him want to hurt the bastard more and more.

Curly's mouth salivated as he enjoyed the show. What a jump, he thought. He felt his heart beating like a hammer in his BLUE-charged penis. I think I'm gonna have to get a piece of that.

* * *

He could feel what was being done to his body. Could feel it in all its dark-praising glory — all its pain. That was his job, his charge, and yet, he was still distant. He wondered for a moment what was happening. Internal bleeding, obviously. His insides were all ripped, torn, and gouged. Infection, too, from that dirty mini-spear shoved up him, plus his own mixed-in fecal matter, was already poisoning him. He felt his life-juice leaking on the inside, as well as all the places where it was coming out of him... coating his legs, helping to lubricate the asshole's thing in a ménage-à-trois of blood, flesh and shit.

He took note, automatically recording every grunt from the panting pig behind him... in him. Every grunt.

Then he started to spasm, his body choking out, gagging on something. What now? Oh, my shattered teeth. How could he have forgotten those? Must've let my mind wander. But to where... Calcutta? Bonn? Tokyo? Someplace more local perhaps? Oregon, maybe. To the woman getting raped, almost as violently as he, a mere 500-yards away, in some nasty little apartment-cube? To her baby, screaming in the background, soiled, laying on a blanket, wandering what was happening? His only diversion: a bottle of sour milk waiting to make his little day.

He felt it all.

ALL.

That was his job. And it was a full day's work. To feel it all, to remember all the pains of the past, as well as the pains being administered in the present. And he did... every stripe, every wail, every burning, pleading scream that had ever escaped a human throat... every fallen tear, every word-cut heart. It was all in him. It was him.

He was PERSONIFICATION.

All the anguish and pain, from the beginning of time to the present,

echoed continuously throughout his soul... filtering to even his physical sensations, even when he wasn't personally getting ravished.

His cicatrix made sure of it, a series of lines that was his personal harrow-of-record, marking him with their all too-visible web. They made him look like a savage, like some freaked-out worshipper of Barker's Pin-head.

Scars, channeling all the sorrow to the pin-point needling of nerves, mercifully unreadable to the humans who looked at them and thought him to be some vile thing.

The rat-a-tat-tat of flesh-butcherer ammunition rippled through his guts, every moment of every day. And gagging, that suffocating feeling, the terror... of... of smoke, black and thick, acrid, mercilessly substituting itself as air, incinerating his lungs as he felt... what so many... what so many had felt during the sacking of Troy, the nightmare of Masada.

Buchenwald.

He felt it all.

Spears, swords, and knives... piercing his body from the battles of Arbela, Syracuse, Thermoplæ. Maces and clubs smashing his skull. The sharpened-edge that had pierced and opened so many pregnant, begging mothers ... in Egypt, in Bethlehem.

When willed, he could focus, feel it happen, as if it were now, the looking up in terror at the dark savage sun as his heart was ripped from its housing, then offered high as a visceral sacrifice.

Laser blasts sliced him, self-cauterizing dismemberment, leaving him drawn-and quartered, with not a molecule of air left in his body during Moon War I.

Dresden lived within. Bataan. The known and unknown victims of the Cold War.

Gettysburg.

And every word.

Every cutting remark, bold-faced lie, and heart-wrecking plea.

He could hear them in his mind, every damned second of every cursed day-and-night. Words. Tortuous words. As painful in their own right as the race-cleansing gas of Dachau. They all reverberated in his thoughts, from tormentor and victim, demanding remembrance. Awaiting The Great Day.

I was only joking, I didn't really want to dance with you, you're ugly... You fucking bitch-whore-cunt... Please, daddy, please. My head hurts; don't hit me again... Let them eat cake... I don't care what you say; it's not my baby... Don't worry; you're only being re-located... Depends on your definition of is ... trust me... I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I won't cheat again... Pleease don - don - don't kill me ... THERE IS NO GOD.

Every lying treatise dwelled within... every filthy Dear-John-Dear-Jane letter, every evil bull written, every duplicitous I'll-be-working-late-

don't-wait-up Post-It... every evil radio transmission, every computer-typewriter-morse-generated lie ... they were all etched into his very being, layered upon themselves ... in him, throughout him, deeper and more sure than anything as transitory as something merely on the genetic-level.

It was all for him to bear. Every pain and tragedy ever suffered... being suffered by every man, woman, and child.

He was faithful. He kept the record within. He was, in truth, The Great Ledger, the Maker's personal walking, talking, feeling book of accounts.

After all the ages, one haunting question still nagged. It was a foolish question. One for which there was no answer, save to the Searcher-of-Hearts. Why? Why do people do this to one another? Wasn't it enough that man had to face natural death? Wasn't it enough they could get sick? That they toiled—just to eat?

A foolish question.

He remembered having it when he'd seen the rivers, the endless rivers of tears cascading down the face of Adam as he wailed out his sorrow to The Everlasting.

He remembered having it before even then. About his own kind. When he'd fought against his brothers after they'd dared to follow the beautiful one.

What a waste.

Why?

Certainly, part of the reason behind man's folly, was the other side. Locusts, flies, lying-birds, scorpions—devils. They helped to cause so much, like what they have done... are doing, working within these two, the gloating fiends.

Still—there was no excuse.

Man could resist.

One day, there would be an accounting and a reckoning. Man had been warned: Forget not to show love unto strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Some do far worse than entertain.

* * *

"Ready for a smoke?" Greasy asked.

"Yeah, well ... maybe another hit of BLUE." Looking down, Curly grimaced. He was a mess. Gore soaked. "I'm kinda grossed out. You didn't say our 'girl' here was split."

"A little pay-back s'all ... fer shootin' your squirt on my hand." Pulling out a pack of Black Jack 5s, Greasy packed 'em down hard. "Better leave the BLUE alone for now. Too much of that nitro, and we'll be about as assed-out as this motherfucker."

"Fine." Curly glanced at the messy heap strewn-out on the ground.

"Hey, ya hear something?" Greasy asked just after tearing open his new pack of cigs.

"Think I did. Fucker's still alive! Think he's saying something." Curly moved to the crumpled pile on the ground.

Curly was immediately joined by his friend, the both of them bending down; leaning close to hear what was coming from the ruined man's devastated mouth.

They were right.

The toy was speaking, repeating something. A message that sounded like—

"'Why?' Is that what this pigshit's saying? 'Why?'"

"Sounds like it, meego," Greasy chuckled in answer.

"Why? MOTHERFUCKER. I'll tell you why. Because we can. That's why." Curly spat out the words. Why? The question freaked him out somehow. Gave him the creeps. Made him feel... as if he'd... done something wrong. Who'd this piece of shit think he was, anyway? Why?

"Can't believe this fucker's still alive. After all we've done ... well fuckin' goddamn-it-to-Shirley, this sonuvabitch is tough. I'll tell you wha—" Greasy stopped. His buddy wasn't paying attention, just stood, staring at the lump with some kind of strange look on his face. Greasy called out, good and loud: "HEY?"

"Yeah, man," Curly answered. "I hear ya. Fuck this white-ass-piece-of-whipped-shit." Curly would never in this life know that the man lying before him could see the tell-tale sparkle in his eyes, his friend's eyes, the sign of devils within.

"What do you want to do? Kill him?" As if by magic, Greasy's clip-it was again in-hand, its serrated edge looking raw and hungry.

"Already done that," Curly answered. "Just a matter of time." Then, looking down and feeling again that strange compulsive urge to inflict, he said, "Go ahead and take out his eyes."

Greasy nodded, smiling.

* * *

The nameless OPEN-24-HOURS restaurant was small and cozy. A little dirty at first glance, but that was a lie. The place was just old, and like many old things, its parts were stained and marred, a bit ragged about the edges. But it was relatively clean. He hoped to find out what the food tasted like—and soon.

It had been a rough night, one not without its sense of irony. He never really got any rest, never experienced a moment's peace. After a ravishing, however, for what seemed like the barest flicker of time, he often did feel better.

It had something to do with the re-knitting of himself.

He briefly ran his tongue over his teeth. They felt firm, strong and secure and new. So unlike they had just hours before, when they'd been broken after catching that two-by-four.

He remembered dying, if it could be called that. Then awakening, feeling his fluids flowing back into his body, his flesh re-establishing itself, eyes reforming, the crackle-pop-crackle of his bones as they re-meshed and went back into the right sockets, everything moving as if under the guiding hands of an all-mighty sculptor, which really, was the truth.

The re-vitalized feeling was a token of The Promise, a refutation of the evil he had to endure, for now.

His clothes were different, had just been on him when he had come-to. Old-looking frayed jeans now covered skinny legs. Dirt-encrusted boots that had seen better days were now on his feet, and an old, plain-blue T-shirt, covered over with a heavily-stained red-flannel long-sleeve, dressed his torso.

The clothes were the usual. Like he'd always worn, garments meet for the day-and-times, region and climate he found himself in. The only thing that ever set his attire apart as being noticeable, was their poverty-stricken look.

And then the only oddity that marked him as being different from the rest of the world's poor, was his eyes and albino-skin, and naturally, his scars. His hair, always thin, always silver in color, often changed its style after a ravishment: going from long to short, curly to straight. Today it was long and drawn back, tied into a pony-tail by a dirty rubber-band he'd found in the alley.

What he had discovered, ages ago, was that people didn't remember him much after he'd left their presence. Something for the best. Most of his work was impersonal, absorbing the terrible blows the world-over, and never forgetting one jot or one tittle of any dark deed done. But, like last night, he also suffered personal attacks, personal assaults of cruelty. His bad brothers, devils all, got a kick out of it.

"Can I help you?" The waitress stood beside his table, face full with contempt. She had taken her time coming, more-'n-likely hoping he'd just give up and leave. Time was on the outer edges of morning; there were hardly any people present, a family or two, a few truckers. He'd been kept waiting for an hour. He would remember.

"Biscuits-and-gravy, please." Looking at the girl's face, he could see himself in her eyes: ugly, scar-marked, bizarre in his albino flesh and no-color eyes. Beneath her.

He could also see her: Christian, by profession, twenty-something, married, and screwing everything in sight, all the while telling her hubby that his fears were just in his head. He could feel her husband's wounded heart. It tore him.

"Commin' right up."

He knew it would be. She'd want him out of here—quick.

Glancing out the window from his booth, he watched the trees, the birds in the air, tried to focus on his environment, tried not to let his mind wander. He didn't want to internalize just yet. Since his re-knitting he'd felt a bit good. Horribly good, his body freshly touched by The Great Lord. But within, it was all still there, an open raw-wound, with salt aplenty, constantly poured on. He could feel it all—locally, globally ... historically, everything but the future.

That was always fresh.

A poor good-hearted cop, just shot dead, so some kid could join a neighborhood crew. A corpse-loving mortuary-worker having his way with a poor widow's wife, hours before the funeral, thinking nobody would ever know.

But he knew.

It was torture.

He could do nothing about any of it. Not yet. All he could do was watch, know, record—and feel.

The pain racked him. But he would bear it. It was his charge, after all. But he didn't want to. Not now. He wanted to enjoy what few moments of slight-relieve were left to him.

Breathing in, he enjoyed the wafting smells of the restaurant: the bacon, the grits, the eggs, T-bone steaks, and... all the rest. Even the subtlest of the restaurant's smells were there for him to enjoy: the spicy, biting scent of Tabasco, the morning-smell of coffee, and the fruity-tangy aroma of ketchup.

He focused best he could, and did his best to ignore the whore-killing truck driver at the end of the counter, all covered in demon-stink.

He failed.

It was bound to happen, did in fact, most every day. The other side liked to taunt him, rub in his lot.

He stared at the large-bellied, dark-hearted, dark-filled man.

And saw it.

A sparkle in the man's eyes, a sparkle recently seen. Checking up on me, he thought.

He could see the waitress heading his way, coming out the kitchen, behind where the truck driver sat, biscuits-and-gravy in-hand.

He'd been right; they'd worked up his order good and fast.

The truck driver, or rather what he was packing inside, gave him a knowing-grin, then toasted him with his coffee.

"The Lord rebuke thee," he whispered. For now.

For a moment the driver looked blank-faced, then turned back to his grits, completely unaware of his actions a moment before.

"Here's your chow," the waitress said, voice flat, hands putting his food down hard on the table.

"Thank you." The waitress didn't give the expected you're-welcome. Instead, she just walked away.

He ate with a gusto rarely experienced. It wasn't that he was starved, though he always felt that way. It was more from simply wanting to enjoy a breakfast.

Too soon he was finished and standing at the register. He wasn't concerned about paying for the meal. Somehow he always had the right amount needed, the exact amount to keep his body going.

Reaching into a pocket, he pulled out a few dirty bills and some coins and set them on the counter. He knew the pile would precisely meet the bill.

"Anything else we can do?" the waitress asked from behind the register.

"How about one of those mints?" he asked, pointing at a small box of Peppermint Patties. He knew he wasn't going to get one, but he clung to the thin-hope anyway. Sometimes he felt he needed more than just what it took to keep his body moving. Sometimes he felt a treat would be nice, would be like ambrosia to his lips and tongue.

"You can read the sign, mister. A quarter a piece."

"Too bad. I'm tapped."

"We all have it tough."

"Hey, sir."

Turning around, he saw a young girl, 10-or-so, sitting at a booth with her mother. Ahhh! How sweet, he thought. He could sense the child's goodness. It flowed out of her like spring-water.

"Yes, little lady?" he said, going to bended knee.

The girl got up and came over. He could see her mother watching with a wise and wary eye. He sniffed a breath of her goodness, as well, and knowing what he looked like, wasn't offended by her suspicion.

"Hi, my name's Tara. What's yours?"

"I am Victim."

"That's a funny name."

"So is Tara. Do you know what Tara means?"

"No."

The girl looked sweet-as-could-be standing in her summer-print dress. "It means 'Tower.'"

"Really? My mother says the Lord is my high-tower."

"Does she now?"

"Anyway, I couldn't help but overhear that you're short a quarter. That you wanted a mint."

"That's right, little one."

"Well, today is your day. I happen to have a quarter."

The girl stood tall and proud, holding her hand out, quarter between two grace-filled fingers.

Glancing at the mother, he saw her smile and give an OK-nod, and he took it. It was the best thing that he'd received in a long, long time.

"Thank you very much, dear lady."

"You're welcome."

The girl smiled and stole a quick glance back at her mother, saw the still-young woman mouth to her 'Go-ahead, its okay.' The girl turned back. "I want you to know..." she hesitated, some shyness taking hold.

"Yes?" he asked, heart melting.

"I just wanted you to know that Jesus loves you. For you to not ever, ever forget." Happy with herself: for her message, her kindness, her bravery... for doing something good, and for making her mother smile, she scampered back to her table. "Have a good day now," she said, sitting across from the woman who was raising her well.

He stood up, heart breaking with joy.

Turning around, he faced the waitress, grabbed a mint, and held up his new quarter from between thumb and finger. "Here."

"Big-man had to take the little girl's money, huh?"

"Yes," he said, hardly able to restrain a hearty laugh.

The born-again adulteress, with folded arms, stared. If she'd been able to look any further down her nose, she'd be looking at her own tits.

Ignoring her, he turned around and walked to the mother and daughter sitting at the table.

"Hello, I won't be a moment," he said to the mother.

"Take your time," she returned.

He looked at the girl. "Tara, you know what you told me?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to say that I know. I do know. And I will never, never forget. I promise."

"I won't either," she answered, smile beaming.

"You two have a wonderful day."

* * *

The parting pleasantries had been nice, but short. He moved to leave the table, and the restaurant. He rarely engaged in conversation with people, and when he did, he kept it brief. He had work to endure. He did notice, however, that the truck driver was nowhere in sight.

Good.

As he left the restaurant he glanced into the heavens, far beyond the morning blue-sky, and said under his breath, Thank you.

He knew his lot was hard. That was why he'd been chosen. The Great One had known he'd be faithful to endure.

It was a hard lot, to stand by — to just watch and feel and remember.

There were Guardians, and they did what they could, sometimes able to strike back into the heart-of-darkness. But his task was different. He had to stand ... and take it, to take it all, and never strike back.

It was hard.

But there was The Promise.

And that he held dear to. Will it be today? Tomorrow? Another hundred, thousand, ten thousand years? He didn't know. Only that it would come to pass.

He used to have a different name, a long time ago. A beautiful name. Unpronounceable by the human tongue. He missed it.

He walked across the near-empty parking lot, direction picked by instinct. It didn't really matter where he went. But, he was thankful. He'd been touched by his Lord, allowed to experience, even if so fleetingly ... goodness.

Looking about at nothing in particular—he spoke. He spoke to remind himself, he spoke in gratitude, spoke to spite evil. “For those who have, and who will be redeemed, there will one day be rest. For all others, though, there will be me.

“Now... today... I am Victim. But one day, when The Word returns, my name will change again. And let those who have delighted in their evil tremble.

“For then, I will be ... Vengeance.”

The moral is: Those graced with impunity are never done so without accruing debt.

SOUL BIDDER

Iain Paton

Nick was flicking through an auction website when it occurred to him he could sell his soul for money. His university degree was going down the toilet, his girlfriend had left him and he just didn't enjoy working. All things considered, his soul wasn't doing him much good, and it was more like a vestigial organ, an inflamed appendix or something. And he could really use the money.

He rummaged through the pockets of his grimy jeans. A fiver and some change. He only had enough for three Happy Hour pints at the student union. Three pints of watery brew was nowhere near enough to drown his sorrows, whether real or imagined.

He looked up at the posters on his bedroom wall. Black Sabbath. We Sold Our Souls For Rock and Roll. Iron Maiden. Number of the Beast. He chewed the ends of his long straggly hair as he pondered the likely benefits and disbenefits of this potential transaction. Earthly riches versus eternal damnation, perhaps.

"Next item," he grinned as he typed, "a human soul, one careful owner, going... going..."

He hit the 'enter' button. 'Gone!'

The entry appeared on the screen: One human soul, 21 years old. Genuine offer! Vendor Nicko666.

He got up and stretched. It was nearly time for Happy Hour. If he was late, he would miss the cheap drink. He shrugged on his greasy leather jacket and slouched out of the room. There was no need to comb his straggly hair or shave. A cloying cloud of deodorant spray and squeezing the worst spots constituted sufficient grooming in Nick's book of etiquette.

* * *

Later on, in the student union bar, Nick drained the dregs of his third pint of fizzy lager. The bar was dark and stank of stale alcohol, particularly the sticky-sweet stench of cider and blackcurrant, the drink of choice of Goth girls and rock chicks, of which there were a few, as Nick noted with pleasure. The flashing red lights illuminated tight leggings and T-shirts, as the girls danced on the other side of the bar, to a moody and pounding alternative beat. Not hardcore enough for Nick, but he liked to watch the women anyway.

He leaned across the table and shouted over the music to his friend. "Mate, I've only gone and sold my soul."

"What the fuck are you on about, Nicko," asked his friend Samson. He slouched over the table, frizzy hair everywhere around tinted granny-glasses.

"My soul," shouted Nick. "It's for sale online, to the highest bidder. My money worries should soon be over."

"That's a bit fucking daft, isn't it," said Samson. "You might get some nutter on your case."

Nick tilted his empty beer glass and gazed wistfully at it as the disco-lights flickered in its empty reflection. "A bloke managed to swop a pencil for a house in two years worth of bidding," he said. "Some people will buy anything for a laugh. I'll make some money on it, no doubt about that." He put the beer glass down. "Any chance of a pint or two, mate? I'm broke, but I'll pay you back when I've sold my soul."

Samson groaned. "Okay, you fucker, but I'm strapped for cash myself."

The world was slightly hazier after another two pints and Nick strolled merrily home, the stars bright in the light summer sky. He pushed open the door of his dingy tenement and stumbled up the urine-stained stairs towards his flat.

"Can you keep it down," yelled his flatmate, as Nick noisily unlocked the door. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Okay," mumbled Nick. "Sorry." Boring fucker, he thought. Probably needs to get up early for church.

He switched on the computer in his bedroom and the screen flickered into life. He logged in to the auction website, to check the status of his soul. There were two anonymous bidders watching his soul, with forty-five hours remaining.

* * *

Next morning, Nick stretched and yawned, farting loudly as the sun probed though the threadbare curtains. "Wake up Dave, time for church," he laughed, 'didn't you smell the bells?' The flatulent odour didn't make much difference to the ambient room, which stunk of body odour and stale laundry. "Here comes the dawn chorus." He squeezed out an insipid wailing fart as he threw back the crusty duvet and wriggled out of bed, his skinny body dressed only in Y-fronts and grimy white socks.

He shrugged off the previous day's underwear and kicked the pants into the corner which served for a laundry basket. He sniffed the backside of his jeans. They would do another day. He pulled on new underwear, the still serviceable jeans and a clean T-shirt. Metallica, it screamed in jagged lightning letters, above rows of tombstones beneath an orange sky. Then he dragged open the curtains, squinting at the sunlight which flooded the dank room. He opened the window and inhaled the fresh air.

"Stinks in here," he mumbled to himself, lighting a cigarette and leaning out, so the smoke would not trigger the alarm. He flicked the butt onto the ground, two floors below. Then, he switched on the computer and went straight to the auction website.

There were three bidders. Beelzebub, offering £10. Asmodeus, with a bid of £50. Shaitan, leading the pack with an offer of £150.

"Very funny," he laughed. The deadline was thirty six hours, twenty three minutes and fourteen seconds away.

Sunday was a quiet day. Nick could have revised for the re-sit exams scheduled for the end of the month, but decided to play computer games instead. This had the benefit of allowing him to check on the increasing value of his soul, in between bouts of blasting monsters and fighting dragons. £150 had risen to £500, then to £750, then to £999 and to £1,500 by the time the twenty four hour point had passed that evening.

Feeling restless, after a day of doing nothing, Nick decided to go down the student union. He knocked on his flatmate's door. "Mate, can I ask a favour."

"What is it," groaned his flatmate David, as he stuck his head around the door. "I'm working on my dissertation, please leave me in peace."

"I've nothing to eat. Could I borrow a tenner off you, until next week? You'll get it back, honest."

Nick listened in anticipation for the rustling of paper money. David had a part-time job rather than relying on overdrafts and loans.

"Here you go, if it will make you go away." David waved a brown note through the gap in the door. "That's thirty quid you owe me now."

The ten pound note bought four non-happy hour pints and a pepperoni pizza down the student union bar. "All the food groups," laughed Nick to himself, as he sipped beer and munched pizza. He even had fifty pence left over for the jukebox.

After stumbling home, he tiptoed into the flat, moving as quietly as possible in a gesture of goodwill to his money-lending flatmate. He switched on the computer again and smoked out of the window as he waited on it booting up. Nearly out of fags, he thought. Hope I actually manage to sell this soul or it'll be off to the bank manager again.

A bidding war was in progress, creeping upwards in increments of £500. Asmodeus was leading the field with an offer of £5,000, with Beelzebub trailing on £4,500.

"Wow," mumbled Nick. He typed the name of Asmodeus into the search engine.

The name means 'Wrath of the Demon'. One of the seven Princes of Hell, or King of the Nine Hells. The demon of Lust, who aided Solomon in the construction of the Temple, with the appearance of a three-headed creature, bearing the faces of a bull, a sheep and a man breathing fire. Sometimes appears as a handsome man who limps.

Beelzebub sparked his curiosity, and he trawled the internet in search of enlightenment.

The name is a derivation of the Philistine god 'Baal' and means 'Lord of the Flies' in Arabic. Identified as a Prince of Demons, Beelzebub has the aspect of both a fly and an elephant and is Lord of the Order of the Fly, associated with pestilence and poison.

"Yuk,," He collapsed on the bed and fell asleep, snoring noisily.

* * *

Nick awoke with a shudder.

The room was in darkness.

Then, a blinding light exploded into life above his head.

"It is mine." A deep tympanic voice echoed all around. Nick could not see the speaker, just a bulky black outline and crackling flames which died away after the creature had spoken.

"No, it is mine." A high-pitched buzzing noise, like a legion of flies. Nick felt one or two of them crawling on his scalp, bluebottles or large house flies, tiptoeing over his eyelids and creeping into his nostrils.

"No,," boomed a voice, which echoed all around, vibrations penetrating Nick's very bones. "The soul is MINE!"

Talons and chitinous forelegs probed his body, digging deep into butter-like flesh, forcing organs aside in wrenching agony as they tore through his abdomen and chest, scraping his spine and clenching around his pulsing heart, pulling it this way and that as steam rose from his ripped body and coppery blood flooded his mouth and nostrils.

He woke up, soaked in sweat and heart hammering. It was three o'clock in the morning, not yet light outside.

* * *

There were ten hours until the auction concluded. His soul was worth six thousand pounds, now that Astaroth had joined in the bidding. Nick went out for a walk, in the sunshine, to try and finding out, after the dream of the previous night. He picked a white Led Zeppelin T-shirt rather than anything black or demonic. It felt safer. They had done Stairway to Heaven after all.

Later on, he checked the website, heart thumping against his ribs, feeling light-headed. Three hours left. His soul was worth seven thousand and five hundred pounds, courtesy of the new bidder Belphegor. Nick found the icon for cancelling the auction, a big red cross, and clicked on it. A form popped up, and he quickly filled it in, trembling fingers tripping over the keys. He clicked the 'Submit' button. Nothing happened. The minutes still clicked by. Sweat trickled down his back as he watched the

auction unfold. Surely these could not be supernatural beings? They would offer far greater inducements than a few thousand pounds. Unless it was just a game to them.

"Don't be a twat," hissed Nick, speaking to himself. "It's probably some devil-worshippers in California." He felt better after that. The money looked really good as well. He slumped in the chair to watch the auction, slurping from a can of supermarket-brand beer.

Belphegor led the bidding for much of the third hour, but his funds clearly did not match his enthusiasm and he ducked out after an hour, his bidding creeping up incrementally and matched easily by the other. A flurry of bidding saw Shaitan jump forward by a thousand pounds, then Astaroth took the total to £9,000. Beelzebub no longer seemed interested. Shaitan increased his bid by five hundred pounds as the seconds clicked away, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two... Nick was swamped with nausea as doubt seized him once again.

Asmodeus bid ten thousand pounds, just as the auction closed. Nick slumped forward, head in his hands. A few seconds later, a message appeared on the screen.

You have something that now belongs to me. I will make the electronic payment immediately. Inform me how I can collect my purchase.

Nick checked his online account and his mouth fell open. Someone had transferred ten grand into his bank account. He had nine thousand pounds to play with, taking into account his overdraft. Despite the knot in his stomach, he smiled. Maybe there was a way out of this after all. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

Come around tomorrow evening, 9pm if that is possible. You can pick it up then. Here is my address....

* * *

The intercom buzzed loudly, as if filled with flies. Someone was at the door. Nick pressed the switch and opened the door.

Footsteps clattered on the stairs and someone knocked on the door. Thump, thump, thump.

Nick opened the door. A tall man stood there, in a dark raincoat and hat.

"You'd better come in."

"Thank you," said the man. The air smouldered in front of him as he spoke. He limped into the flat, as Nick closed the door.

"Where is the item?" The man's flame-licked words gently scorched Nick's face, like sitting too close to a fire.

"In there." Nick pointed to the door. The man pushed it open.

"Who's that?" David's voice tailed off into speechlessness.

"I'll leave you to it." Nick ducked into his own room as David's door swung quietly shut.

The scream was horrendous and went on forever. Nick covered his ears, and pulled the pillow over his head, eyes squeezed shut and mouth wide open in his own silent scream. David's pain-wracked screams resonated through the wall, through the pillow and through every fibre of Nick's body. There was worse, the sound of flesh tearing wetly, bones snapping, organs rupturing, and a wet smacking noise as something was devoured.

Then, as silence fell, Nick heard limping footsteps, doors slamming. It was gone.

Nick crept out of his room and hesitantly pushed open David's door. He was prepared for a charnel-house of gore, strewn organs and flesh, pools of steaming blood, the stench of wet death in his nostrils. But he wasn't prepared for what he saw.

The room was empty. Completely bare. No bed, no posters, no chair, no books. As if David had never been there. As if someone had never been there.

David? Nick rubbed his chin. He was sure he knew someone called David. As the memory faded, he realised what it meant to lose a soul. It was the loss of your existence, your essence, as if you had never been. David?

Nick smiled. He had nine grand in the bank. That would pay the rent, he could find a flatmate to replace whoever-it-was, maybe buy a guitar and pay for some lessons. Start a band. The smile faded. The money would run out and what would he do then?

He grinned again. He could always sell another soul. Or maybe more than one. His tutorial group, for example. They were so smug and all-knowing, most of them with good grades. They despised him, and his tutor despaired of him.

Ten souls in a single auction. Surely they would be worth half a million?

He switched on the computer.

The moral is: Efficiency is intelligent laziness.

LUNCH HOUR

Paul Germano

James Berger was having a rough day at the office and it was still only 11:45 in the morning. He rubbed his hand across his forehead, took a deep breath and clicked his mouse to close the file he was working on.

"I'm taking an early lunch," he announced to no one in particular. Within minutes, he was out of the office, down the elevator and zig-zagging his fairly-new Lexus through the parking garage, with his windows rolled up and the air conditioning blasting at full throttle. James knew just where to go to take the edge off of what was gearing up to be a real bear of a day. He navigated his way through the early lunch-hour traffic that was already clogging up the downtown streets, eventually making it all the way down to a seedy neighborhood on the forgotten fringes of downtown. He parked on a grimy side street near a highway overpass. Underneath the bridge, a smattering of homeless people congregated in the shade seeking shelter from the brutality of the hot sun. Further down the road, with no shade for protection, the prostitutes were making their presence known; ready to conduct business with anyone willing to buy.

Five women, each laying claim to her own piece of turf in the sweltering heat, were spread out over a three-block stretch of decaying sidewalks and overgrown grass. James tugged at his tie, eyeing his five options. Well four actually, since the chubby redhead was already in the midst of waddling her way over to a rusty two-door Ford that had sloppily parked with one tire on the curb. As the rusty Ford, with the redhead now inside, sped away, its wheels screeching, James surveyed the other four women. There were two brunettes, one black and one white; and two blondes, both white. His eyes settled on a woman of average height and average weight. She had taken the time to braid her golden blonde hair into long pigtails that hung just inches above her waist, making her look like one of those warrior women from Europe's Dark Ages. But there was nothing warlike about her demeanor; not in the graceful way she moved her body nor in the clothes she chose to wear. She seemed far more dignified than the trashy whores that James had grown accustomed to. She wore a loose-fitting pale yellow dress with a yellow-and-tan brocade belt around her waist and a matching brocade choker around her neck. The dress had a low neckline that showed off her cleavage, but not in a slutty sort of way. She held on tightly to a folded newspaper that she was putting to good use, delicately fanning herself to fend off the summer heat.

James could see that she had a genuine sense of style and he liked that about her right off. In that sense, they were birds of a feather. James took

pride in his appearance. He had neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper hair and a flat stomach that he maintained by regular trips to the gym. He had a healthy tan that was two-thirds legitimately gained from the hot summer sun and one-third from touch-up visits to the tanning booths. He was wearing a pair of cream-colored cotton Dockers, a light blue shirt and a paisley-patterned navy tie that complimented the navy blazer he left behind at the office. He had loosened his tie, but still kept it knotted and dangling from his neck.

James rolled down his widow. "Hey Goldilocks," he called out, motioning for her to come over. She had a wispy way of walking, her dress fluttering as she glided her way over to his car.

"You're new here," he said. She nodded her head up and down, smiling broadly. She had nicely shaped teeth that formed a warm smile, although they were slightly discolored, which James found somewhat off-putting. James had never seen her working the streets before and he knew he should exercise some caution. There was always the remote possibility that she could be an undercover cop. He knew how much the police loved to hassle innocent johns such as himself. But those women cops were never very convincing; they stuck out like a sore thumb.

James Berger was absolutely certain that the golden blonde in braids was not a cop, so he got right to the point. "How much for a blow job?"

She seemed startled by his abruptness, but was quick to say "forty dollars." She had a soft, warm voice. No sign of the harsh tones typical of hookers. For a split second he found himself doubting his own judgment. Could she be a cop? He shot down those doubts in an instant. Women cops had a certain harshness when they spoke, different than the harshness of a whore, but harsh none-the-less. Her voice was far too soft and soothing to be a cop. But she was no ordinary hooker. There was something special about this woman. He could feel it in his gut. Still forty dollars was a bit pricey. Especially when, just a few feet away, leaning her skinny body against a Stop Sign, was a crack whore that James knew for a fact would be happy to service him for ten bucks flat. James looked over the golden blonde's shoulder at the crack whore, her bony body in high heels, a tight pair of short-shorts and a bright red t-shirt, her stringy blonde hair limp from the summer sun. Then he turned his attention back to the golden blonde leaning into his window and shook his head no. "Forty's too much, make it twenty."

She stepped back and laughed a wispy laugh. "Do you think you're at an arts and crafts fair, where you can haggle about the price of a piece of pottery?" Her voice remained soft and soothing.

"I'm not interested in a piece of pottery. I want a piece of ass," he said, pleased with himself.

She twisted her full lips into a scowl. "Well which is it? Do you want ass or oral?"

He raised his left eyebrow. "Head, like I said." Again he laughed, amused, but growing impatient. He checked his watch. "Look, I don't have a whole lot of time. I'm on my lunch hour. Make it thirty dollars and we've got a deal." He reached across the passenger's seat and pushed open the door for her.

She settled herself in his Lexus, laying the newspaper down on the floor mat. She told him how "wonderfully cold" the air conditioning felt and he nodded in agreement. "Before I say 'yes,' let's see how you taste," she said. He bristled at the remark. She's an odd one, he almost said right out loud. She reached for his arm, taking it gently in her soft hand and began to stroke his wrist. She rolled up his sleeve, then sniffed at his bare arm and began to lick it, running her tongue up and down the length of his lower arm. "Ummm," she said, her sweet voice heaving as if in ecstasy.

"You taste good," she said, "you taste successful, very successful." Flattered, a smile stretched across his face. "Well I do okay. I'm with a good company. They treat me well."

She nodded her head as if she cared and went right back to licking his forearm, licking it until it was so completely soaked that James felt compelled to yank it away from her grasp. She smiled, brushing her soft hand against his leg. "We've got a deal," she said, looking him directly in the eyes and licking her lips.

"Good," he said. "And no spitting. You have to swallow." Her eyes blinked rapidly. "I always swallow," she said, letting out a strange little laugh that sent a chill down his spine. James wasn't sure what it was about the laugh that creeped him out so much, but he had no time to dwell on it. He let the thought slip away, shifting his attention to his salvia-soaked forearm. He ran his moist arm down the length of his shirt, rubbing as much of the wetness away as he could.

"I love your tie," she said, tweaking it with her fingers. "Thanks, it's a Calvin Klein," he said proudly. She took his necktie in her hand and started to play with it, lifting it up to tickle his face. As she toyed with his tie, he noticed a few fresh scratches on her arm and a deep scar on her right hand that seemed fairly recent and another scar near her wrist that seemed less recent. He yanked his tie away from her grasp and then untied the knot, rapidly pulling it off of his neck and tossing it into the back seat.

She snuggled up against his torso. "Hold on a minute," he said and gently eased her back to the passenger's side of the car. "I'm going to drive around the block, where it's a little more private. Then we can get started."

As he made his way around the block, she suggested they go a little further, guiding him to an empty lot. The isolated lot which had once been parking space for a now-vacant boarded-up office building, was completely fenced in. But the padlock on the gate had been busted away and the gate itself was opened just enough for his Lexus to slip right in. It was a gravel stone lot that had succumb to an overgrowth of vines and weeds and of

whip plants left to their own devices that had grown to tree size in stature. The lot was peppered with clusters of burdock burs that would have stuck to their clothes if they had bothered to venture outside of the car. He pulled the Lexus into a corner spot, its wheels trampling down some of the overgrowth, but still leaving them surrounded in an entanglement of weeds, vines and tree-sized plants. The Lexus seemed to almost disappear in the abundance of greenery.

She snuggled close to his chest. "Ummm," she whispered, "you smell good, so very good; what a nice musky scent." He rubbed his hand across his forehead, "What? Oh, my cologne, you mean my cologne. Well thanks," he said. "It's Polo." He took a deep breath as he repositioned himself to get more comfortable. Gently, she began to unbutton his shirt. She started to kiss and lick his chest, working her way down his torso.

He unbuckled his belt, unzipped his pants and again shifted his body weight. He was ready for her. She continued to kiss and lick his torso, stopping at his stomach and making big wet circles around his belly button, causing him to laugh like a little boy. "That tickles," he said, stifling another laugh. She kept at it, making big wet circles.

"You are something else, Goldilocks," he said tugging at her braided pigtails. "Okay that's enough of that. Remember, I'm on my lunch hour. I've only got so much time." He grabbed at his erection, but she ignored his prodding and continued to stay focused on his belly button. "It's time you move that tongue of yours down a little further," he said in a firm voice to make it sound like an order, but then he started to laugh again. "Stop it, it tickles," he said. But she wouldn't budge. She stayed the course, making big wet circles around his belly button. He threw back his head, laughing a boyish laugh, his eyes looking upward, his gaze fixed on the car's padded roof.

Without warning, she reached down for the folded newspaper and grabbed the large kitchen knife hidden inside the fold. With one swift movement she jabbed the knife into his stomach.

"What the ..." He didn't finish the sentence, not wanting to waste his efforts on too many words, knowing instinctively that he might only have a finite use of words left in him. He wanted to be sure to use his energy wisely. He looked down in disbelief. She twisted the knife inside of him, mangling his insides, then pulled the knife back out and jabbed it right back in again.

He tried to yell for help; he tried so hard; "help, help," he said in a voice that was barely audible. He knew he had to muster all his strength and yell as loud as he possibly could, loud enough so that someone, *anyone*, would be able to hear his voice. He knew it was his only hope. But as he struggled to open his mouth, everything went black.

James Berger had passed out. The golden blonde pulled the kitchen knife out of his torso and thrush it back in again, piercing his heart. If he had

been conscious, the pain would have been unbearable. But he remained in an unconscious state as his life slipped away, completely away.

Though it would do him no good now, James Berger had been right. The golden blonde with the braided pigtails was definitely not a cop. But he was wrong about her being a whore, dead wrong. James Berger had made the mistake of picking up a real live 21st century cannibal.

With the corpse slumped over in the driver's seat, she pulled the knife back out of his dead body, licking at the goo on the side of the knife, careful not to cut her tongue on the sharp blade. Then she grabbed at the dead arm and took a healthy bite out of it, ripping at the flesh, tearing into the entanglement of muscles and veins. "Fresh meat," she said, her voice in a gurgle, her eyes rolling back in her head, her face exhibiting true ecstasy. Her appetite satisfied for the moment, she grabbed at the slumped over corpse with both of her hands, rolling him down to the floor of the car. Then she climbed over the body and settled herself in the driver's seat. She twisted the ignition key, gunning the engine and headed for the highway. It took her less than 15 minutes to get home to the cluster of townhouses nestled in a sprawling suburb, just north of the city. She guided the Lexus into her garage and was quick to shut down the engine. She stayed seated in the driver's seat, waiting patiently for her automatic garage door to go back down so she could have complete privacy.

She reached down, removing the wallet from the dead man's back pocket. She helped herself to \$67 in cash that had been neatly tucked away in a descending order of two twenty-dollar bills, one ten, three fives and two singles. She pulled out the credit cards, then studied his driver's license. He was 41 years old and would have turned 42 had he made it to October. He carried photos in his wallet, a woman, some children. She wondered if they were his wife and kids. Maybe? Probably? Definitely. She could see the family resemblance in the faces of the two children, both boys.

She studied the photos. They too, appeared to be arranged in an orderly fashion. First, a picture of an attractive brunette, all smiles, light pink lipstick, delicate silver earrings. His wife, she supposed, followed by baby pictures, a newborn and another newborn, then the two baby boys together, then one of the boys all smiles in a high chair with baby food all over his face, then the other boy riding a tricycle with tiny American flags on both of the handlebars. And still a few more pictures, but she stopped looking. She had seen enough. Her eyes clouded up. Her body trembled. She would have shed a few tears if only she could remember how to cry.

She let the wallet drop to the floor mat and focused on the dead body balled up on the floor of the car. She opened the car door, situating herself as best as she could to get a good solid grip of the lifeless body. The corpse was heavy and bloody and cumbersome. But she managed to pull it out of the car and drag it over to her utility room. The utility room was small and she kept very little in there. She had an old sewing machine in the corner that

she never used, a few folding chairs that she sometimes used and a top-loading storage freezer, that her uncle, the deer hunter, had willed to her when he was still of sound body and sound mind.

She struggled to lift the body up and over the side of the freezer. She got part of it in and then went about rearranging his limbs to get as much of him in as possible. She twisted and contorted his body, bending his arms and legs until she was finally able to get all of him inside the freezer. She slammed it shut, leaning her weight on top of the freezer until she was completely sure it was closed tight. "Done," she said. The grisly task complete, she let loose with a sigh of relief, followed by a sigh of accomplishment. The body would keep for the night. Tomorrow she could slice, cut and chop it down to size, sectioning it off into smaller pieces, making the fresh cuts of meat more manageable. She thought to herself, maybe tomorrow afternoon, she might have the muscular calf from his lower left leg for lunch, serve it with a large baked potato smothered in sour cream and a nice Caesar salad on the side. Smooth sailing she thought to herself. Then, an image flashed in her mind: the attractive brunette, all smiles, light pink lipstick, delicate silver earrings.

"No," she said, pushing the thought away. She needed to concentrate. She had a big mess to clean up. She made some immediate decisions: Later tonight she would slip on a pair of yellow latex gloves and vigorously scrub the car clean, eliminating any traces of her presence. Just to be on the safe side, she would burn the blood-splattered folded newspaper that was still on the floor mat. She also decided it would be best to set the floor mats on fire as well. Naturally, his wallet and clothes would also find their way into the flames. Then in the morning, she would put on a refined pair of white gloves and take the car for a morning drive, then ditch it somewhere in the city, close to a bus route.

Her meat now secure in the freezer and her clean-up plans in place, she was free to relax. In the bathroom, she stood in her shower, letting the water run until it was just the right temperature. She stepped under the nozzle and shut her eyes. The warm water felt so good cascading down her body. She felt completely at ease. Then that photograph flashed again in her mind, the attractive brunette, all smiles, light pink lipstick, delicate silver earrings. She tried to push it away, but more images followed, the boy in the high chair, the other boy on the tricycle. Her body trembled. She struggled to push the images out of her mind and then she saw his face, first his driver's license photo, then his actual face, the look of disbelief after she had jabbed the knife in his side, the... "No!" she screamed. "No! No! No!" She inhaled deeply. "Done," she said. The images were gone.

Feeling fresh and clean, she wrapped a towel around her head and slipped into a fluffy white bathrobe and white satin slippers. She glided her way into the living room and dropped a classical CD into her player, setting the volume at a low level for background music. Her living room, like the

rest of her townhouse, was decorated in soft, muted colors. She hummed along to Beethoven and headed through her hallway.

In the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of white wine, grabbed a pencil from her catch-all drawer and tucked yesterday's newspaper under her arm. She still had not yet gotten around to doing yesterday's crossword puzzle.

She went back into her living room, still humming along to Beethoven. She placed a coaster on the end table for her wine and drifted over to the CD player, adjusting the volume ever so slightly, making it just a tad lower. She settled herself on the sofa and propped her satin-slipped feet up on the coffee table. She shifted her weight to make herself a little more comfortable and went right to work on the crossword puzzle, starting with the upper left section and tackling the puzzle one section at a time. Every now and then, she'd take a generous sip of wine. She smiled contentedly. She had the sweet taste of white wine on her lips, her crossword puzzle was progressing along at a steady pace and the cultured sounds of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5 in C minor* played in the background at a dignified low volume -- all of it making her feel ever so civilized.

The moral is: Never give to or take a ride with strangers.

HEALTHY

Alan Spencer

Simon Horton sat on the bar-stool eying the beers on tap and smelling those sharp barley hops floating in the air. He craved a cold beer. Any camel piss brand, it didn't matter, he'd lick it from the bottom of an ash tray (and he'd like that, being an ex-smoker) to enjoy even one single lukewarm sip. And here was George edging up to him, the bartender of Harley's Pub—a place frequented by fire fighters and policemen, and also by one forty-eight year old night watchman, that being himself—to rib him about his new dietary regimen.

"Why keep coming here?" The curly headed Irishman teased him, leaning over and giving him a suspicious eye perusal, as if he could read into Simon's secret experience; what one single thing had happened to finally convince him to change his greasy fat laden diet indefinitely. "Seriously, you're torturing yourself. It's like setting out a cake at a "Weight Watchers" reunion. For God sakes, you don't even smoke anymore. You poor sap, why do you do it to yourself? Why sit here and watch everyone live it up?"

He lived down the need to tell the man the real truth, as he'd done for the past three weeks, and placed his order. "Just pour me an orange juice and shut up about it."

George saluted him, and using his rag, he wiped the counter in front of him clean. "Aye aye, Captain. If you want to get drunk on vitamin C, who I am to tell you otherwise?"

Simon had recently come off a double shift at Guard Dog Security, and in the past, he would've habitually enjoyed an evening of darts, billiards, and the vintage pin ball machine in the corner, all during which he'd slug back pitcher after pitcher of frosty cold beer and meals of buffalo wings, blue cheese hamburgers, onions rings, and nacho cheese inferno fries. But not anymore, he thought with disdain. He wasn't allowed those creature comforts ever again.

Mary Hansen, a police dispatcher in her late fifties, was lugging a filled pitcher to her table of gal friends when she turned to Simon, and said to him in passing, "God, you've lost a lot of weight. You're looking good. Tell me your secret. I'm still burning off my two kids."

"Will power," he suggested, taking the orange juice from the bartender. "And drinking lots of these."

She moved on, and then Simon asked George, "Can I get a garden salad? The biggest you got."

Chief Miles Wilkinson overheard his request and busted out in rude laughter, while letting stogie smoke unfurl from his mouth. "You hear that, he's asking for a salad? Asking for a salad at a pub! What happened to the old Simon who dipped his stomach in nacho cheese?"

A few other cops made jabs at him about watching his figure and needing fiber to "get the lead out." He ignored them as he'd done since the change, knowing they wouldn't believe him or understand his motives.

What happened to him hadn't happened to them.

Wilma Brinkley, a file clerk down at the county police station, sat next to him with a beer in each hand. "Seriously, you deserve a treat Simon. It's light beer. You can indulge."

The dip in his stomach, he used to believe it was gas or indigestion, but the tightening and constriction of his midsection was something much more unbelievable.

"No thank you, Wilma." He gave her an honest smile, though he was nervous during the declining. "I'm on a roll. I only sit here for the environment. For you wonderful people."

Wilma was pretty tipsy, leaning against the bar and cracking up. "Yes, we're regular socialites. Great conversationalists. Hank can make farting noises with both hands. Oh, and Collins can make farting noises come out his ass."

She then peered into him, seriously trying to dismantle the reasons for his change. "You're seriously not drinking anymore, are you?"

"Doctors orders," he lied. "I've gotta cut it out."

* * *

Six months ago, he visited the doctor because of the cramps in his belly. Bad digestion. Shortness of breath. He was getting up to pee at least four times during the night. It didn't help that he drank a six pack every night after his shift at Guard Dog Security, or that he'd microwave a batch of hotdogs smothered in ketchup, relish, and caramelized onions. Dr. Cranston was a younger man, fresh out of his residency, and in shape, a single man with the time and energy to pay lots of attention to his body. He demonstrated no leniency with his patient.

"You eating right?"

"I take a vitamin."

"How about water? You drinking enough water, Simon?"

He didn't bother answering that one.

"You've gained sixty pounds since I've seen you last, and that was three years ago. You're over fifty, and you've got to start taking care of yourself. You're three hundred and thirty-five pounds; you see where I'm getting at? You're asking for a heart attack, diabetes, hypertension, high blood pressure, stroke—"

"I know, I know."

"Then take my advice seriously. Cut out the fatty foods. Quit smoking. Exercise five times a week. Walking three miles a day would be awesome. You've got to make a start, and it has to be now."

Dr. Cranston peeked into the trash can near the weight scale. "Is that your bottle of soda in there? You know you're not supposed to drink anything except water before the blood tests, right?"

I couldn't help it. Caffeine headaches.

* * *

He was a soldier of hunger and a mercenary smoker. During his shift at Guard Dog Security, he'd load himself up on everything he'd need to occupy himself for twelve hours, while walking—but mostly sitting—down the hallways in Corporate Woods where he'd guard the storage rooms filled with overstock from retail stores in the area. He'd roll up both sleeves, each arm disguising a pack of cigarettes. And the high prices didn't deter his pack and a half a day habit. He'd gone from "All American" to "Stag Ultras" to "Big Chief" and finally, he lowered himself into buying the absolute cheapest smokes called "Red Staff '90's." He'd open a window, stick his head out, enjoy a puff-puff, and move on, calculating how many he could smoke and how fast, and he was always beating and creating new records. Then there was the snacks. He couldn't last without his treats. In his front shirt sleeve, he stored a package of Little Debbie snack cakes. In his khakis, he stashed a ream of beef jerky. Ten small bags of chips were kept hidden throughout his person, among six candy bars, and four microwavable burritos (and he licked the orange fat off the wrapper once it cooled off; a guilty pleasure). And the last thing, he had five dollars in quarters for the soda machine, so he could enjoy the carbonated sweetness to please his pallet. Every shift, he was a walking soldier hell bent on defeating hunger and smoking to his heart's content, until...

* * *

He finished every leaf of lettuce on his plate, the sprigs of greens he had no idea what they were (garden weeds maybe), and that's when his side finally stopped aching.

George arrived to take his plate, chiding him once again, "Ah, a clean plate. It goes well with a scotch and soda dessert."

"Can't do it."

"You're breaking my heart. I was going to retire off of you, Simon, you know that?" He eyed the officers throwing darts, chugging back brews, downing chicken fingers dipped in ranch buffalo sauce, and then the set of female officers enjoying cosmopolitans and strawberry margaritas while

living up the atmosphere that was fueled by good food and even better spirits. “Now I have to depend on these idiots with badges for my nest egg. Oh well, there’s more of you out there, Simon, and I’ll find them. Mark my words. They’ll one day grace the same seat as the renowned Simon Horton.”

He whispered it so softly, the bartender didn’t hear him, “there won’t be anymore Simons out there if what happens to me happens to them.”

* * *

“Wake up, wake up, Simon.”

“Simon!” Then in his ear, yelled just as loud, “Wake up, Simon! Simon!”

Shaken, jostled, his name called out again and again, he finally opened his eyes, his voice heavy with grogginess, “Whu—what’s that? What’s going on? Why are you calling my name?”

It was Sheryl, his date tonight. Where he was, he couldn’t remember, but she was topless—no, naked—and in his bed straddling him, but how the moment came to be, he was clueless. And why was she was collecting her clothing from up off of the floor? He kept asking her where she was going, and what they had been doing. She slipped on her dress and fitted her high heels back onto her feet, hissing, “You fell asleep during sex, you insensitive moron!”

* * *

He had another moment where he could’ve turned things around before the horrible incident occurred. This go around, there was no getting up from where he lay, feeling so ice cold against the floor. Then he opened his eyes. The ceiling faced him, the light fixture’s beam so bright it seemed to brand him. He’d passed out on his job, he gathered. He could only move one arm, barely able to check his watch. He’d been out for two hours. Oh shit, he kept thinking. Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit. It was Saturday. Few people worked on Saturdays. Nobody had seen him. Knowing this, he tried to get back up, but every muscle was limp. His neurons weren’t firing the commands.

Lucky for him, down three halls, a door opened, and the clomp of high heels rushed in, and there came Laura Hildebrandt, a manager of the building’s services, who came to his aid, but she couldn’t help him up. He was too heavy. She promised to call an ambulance, and he laid in place until the stretcher arrived to lug him into the emergency vehicle and escort him to the hospital.

Sitting on the bed in the emergency room, Dr. Cranston had given him a final warning, one he should’ve heeded, but he’d ignored like all the

other ones. "Health needs to be your priority, Mr. Horton. Without a major change, I don't give you more than five to ten more years to live."

* * *

Officer Nathan Sparks, a middle aged patrol cop, sat next to him with a basket of mozzarella sticks, chugging back the remains of his beer shooter. "I heard you weren't drinking anymore. Did you fall off the horse, or is it getting on the horse?"

He patted his own belly, a healthy round pot. "I guess I should start taking down a few salads myself, huh?" He was serious now, "How do you do it, man? Be around all of this and not stuff your face, I mean."

The look Simon offered came off automatically, and whatever expression he created, and he could feel it burn on his face, a heavy etching of sorrow and horror and foreboding, that Officer Sparks didn't bother to wait for an answer and retreated to the other side of the room in horror.

Moving on from the awkward moment, Simon talked to some of his other buddies, and he kept getting awkward glances his way, and he didn't care. They had no idea what would be in store if they didn't straighten up their acts. He couldn't be the only one to experience this. It'd happen to others, he was certain. Why it happened, he had no bases of reasoning, but it had occurred, real as his flesh and blood, real as the people in the bar, as tangible as pain and as memorable as a near death experience.

He was surprised when Officer Brice Hetley joined him, patting his back once, and then greeting him with a question. "You gave Nate quite the scare. He's going on and on about the look you gave him. But hey, he's wasted. He'll have to call his wife to drag his sorry ass home in about an hour. But he—hell, everybody—want to know why you started the diet? Be honest. We're all at that age where our health actually matters, right? So break me off some of that wisdom."

Waiting for his orange juice re-fill, he decided to unload the burden he'd kept to himself these past three weeks, and whether they'd believe him or not, he didn't care anymore.

* * *

A week after the hospital visit, he tried his best to cut back on the booze, but greasy food, snack foods, and sodas, he couldn't resist. He'd bought two dozen donuts home with him after his shift, having the weekend ahead of himself to watch TV and sleep in and generally do nothing except eat and glue his eyes to the boob tube. Then he ordered a pizza from "Manny's," known best for their ham and pineapple pizza, his favorite, and half-way through a large, he felt a sharp stab in his gut. A digging lance caused him to

shutter, as if razor blades were swimming in his fat rolls, creating gashes and nicking his insides.

"Ah Gawd," he moaned, leaning over from the couch, unable to take it anymore. "Oh man, I'm paying for it now, aren't I?"

He rushed to the bathroom when he suddenly went blind, seeing black, no color, no hint of definition in anything, only darkness. He was weeping, so scared, so vulnerable, and that's when his sobbing was cranked up to a new level of distress. Hunched over the sink, he was lifted up by a force unknown to him, but it was so powerful and unrelenting, that his feet left the ground, and he was suspended in the air. He was hanging, it seemed, by the way his body swayed like a piece of laundry on a clotheslines—or a piece of meat stabbed through the shoulder blades in a butcher's freezer.

Simon gathered the breath, the stamina, to cry out for help. He had the ability to speak one moment, and then the next, he was robbed of that privilege, the only sounds coming out of him before nothing at all was a squeak and him pronouncing the "H" of "help." Then the muscles of his back seemed to fold, sending both his arms dangling behind his back. So tense, he couldn't inch or budge, as if he was trapped in the clutches of a giant hand that could squeeze him to death at any moment. No lung capacity, he wasn't breathing anymore, and his chest was sinking into itself, the lungs themselves shriveling up and so tight he thought they'd tear.

The next moments happened so quickly, he could only decipher the visions through memory, because as it was happening, he was so awestruck and horrified. Still blind, there was a slash of tearing cloth, then the spilling of liquids, as if the tub underneath his feet was filling up with a heavy soup. Then there was blood running down his face, the hotness crossing his cheeks in thickening bullets, and then dribbling off his chin and pattering against the gathering mess in the tub.

And without knowledge of how it was possible, he was viewing himself from across the room, maybe three paces away, and what he was hanging by. Cords of bluish-red muscles were wrapped around his throat and looped around the shower curtain rod, keeping him poised in the air. The visceral cables tightened around his neck, somehow turning his head down to the tub, and what he caught was vile and disgusting and ghastly in any context: a stew of blood and yellow bubbles of human fat—his own fat!—and it was boiling so hot, so volatile, he felt the noxious steam kicked up in his face.

Up from the boiling mess floated a human liver bloated to four times its size, slick with clear oil, and it formed pours and nodules on its brownish-black body, eking out what looked to be the same orangey grease that was in his microwave burritos. Then the visceral noose around his neck lifted up his head again. He could see the bathroom mirror and his own face and how his eyes were missing from the sockets—the eyes themselves

perched in front of the mirror on a soap dish, the orbs still attached to nerve cords, so he could look at himself.

The shifting eyes directed his sight to his exposed torso, and how his guts had sloughed off into the tub. But the eyes really wanted him to notice how shriveled and pathetic the sacks of his lungs looked, as if they'd been smoked in an oven, on their last moments of life, as they oozed brown bile. And he kept bleeding, dripping from every open orifice, as he saw into himself, inside himself, and he couldn't avoid what his body was telling him, and that's when he lost consciousness.

* * *

Of course Simon didn't tell Officer Hetley that version of the story, or how he'd woken up on the floor of his bathroom with a long scar going up from his navel to his chest, and how his eyes were raw and sore for the next few days. All he could tell the man was, "I had a heart attack in my apartment. I woke up on my back, and when I went to the hospital, they said I was damn lucky to be alive."

"Whoa man, I didn't know that. No wonder you're stuffing your face with greens instead of chicken wings."

Officer Hetley received the long neck glass of cherry ale and toasted him. "To good health, my friend! Good for you, man."

Good for you, man, he thought. It wasn't much of a consolation.

He was alone again after his friend rejoined his buddies near the pool tables. Simon would keep coming here, he decided, on his nights off until he met another person who had made the transition; who'd seen inside themselves and didn't like what was reflected back at them in the mirror.

The moral is: Always listen to your body.

THE GHOST OF MERRICK MANSION

E. W. Bonadio

Before that day twenty years ago, I had never really believed in ghosts. My perspective changed however, when I came face to face with the ghost of Merrick mansion.

It all began on a late afternoon and a lazy summer's day in front of a deserted Victorian house adorned with stained glass windows, high turrets, and gargoyles. Those strange gargoyles were the catalyst in my becoming a true believer. A curious boy with attitude topped off by a smidge of naivety, I thought my life charmed. Having heard the stories of haunted houses and graveyards, I yearned to feel the rush of playing hide and seek with mythical creatures of the night. The exhilaration of late night prowling quickly became addictive. Not into destructive behavior, the prime motive in my addiction was pushing the envelope - to live dangerously. Scribbling chalk graffiti on tombstones and mausoleums was certainly not out of bounds. Neither was breaking into the Merrick place. Merrick mansion had been deserted for nearly ten years. It was also the center of several mysterious happenings, one being the accidental death of the young man who lived there and his widowed mother a week after his funeral. A short walk from my friend, abode, the Merrick place had seen its best days. We called it a mansion because of the many strange adornments gracing the exterior. Funny grotesque creatures, tongues hanging out, a perfect perch for starlings. I imagined those devilish creatures gulping down any who lingered. Nestled at the end of the street some forty yards from the thoroughfare, it sat unadorned and in disrepair. To young Turks like Benny and I, the Merrick place was a mystery mansion with many secrets waiting to be revealed.

Benny Scarfo, and I were not bad eggs, but on occasion we did go overboard, like the time we planted a cherry bomb in old man Gifford's mailbox. That gimmick cost me a month's allowance. After a forced penance, community service and a serious grounding, Benny suggested that we cool it with the neighbors. "Let's break into the Merrick place," he offered, "it's deserted and we can't get into trouble just rooting around." He paused, "But I heard it's haunted."

"Haunted, with ghosts?" I said.

"That's what my dad said, but I think he just wanted to scare me away from exploring the place. Told me that a kid got hurt trying to climb into the second story window to retrieve a baseball a year ago...said a ghost tried to pull him into the house."

"Then it must be true," I cautioned.

"It would be fun to find out," Benny answered. "I know a way in. Maybe we'll find hidden treasure." I cringed at the thought decided to meet him there at dusk. Standing at the front gate of the driveway leading up to an oversized portico, Benny rubbed his palms. "This will be the best adventure ever...look at those carvings over the windows. They look like dragons."

"No, they're gargoyles," I offered. I was well versed in such things, having read up on the devilish carvings in medieval history class. I reminded him, "They were originally put onto buildings to ward off evil spirits."

"Cool," he drooled, "then one of them can protect us from the ghost. I'm gonna get me one."

I cringed. "No Benny, I don't think that's a good idea." "Oh, so you're scared of a little carving? Not me. I want one and if you don't help me, I'll do it alone."

"Okay," I said. "I'm in, but the gargoyles are high up and you'll have to crawl out from the attic. Hope you're not afraid of heights," I cautioned. Benny grimaced and after a minute of silence, he pointed and said,

"That window just below that attic vent. We'll get one from there. I'll bring the tools." As Benny chatted away I stared up at the tower and the creatures hanging above the window facing the side yard. Then I saw it, a flicker of light. Faint at first, it moved left to right midway across the window. I grabbed at Benny's sleeve. "There's someone up there, Benny... someone's in the window."

He was surveying the grounds and as he turned the light was gone. "Nah, it's probably your imagination. You're just spooked. My dad says that old lady Merrick died in that room up there." He pointed to the tower jutting out from the side of the house. "Others have said she was kooky... said that she died of a broken heart over her son's sudden death... willed the property to the city." He shook his head. "Nobody cared about old lady Merrick. But there were whispers that she and her husband were very superstitious...dabbled in the occult."

A young couple rounded the corner and I turned away. Paying no attention, they walked past us, lost in each other. "That's Mr. Boggs's son Jimmy with his new girlfriend," Benny said. "He lives next door."

"Hope he didn't hear us," I chirped.

"Nah, don't worry, Jimmy's cool," he answered. "Right now he's got his mind on girls... get's a new one every month." Benny smiled. "I've got a hunch he'll stick with this one for awhile ...she's hot."

I was spooked but Benny assured me, "It's just your imagination."

"Okay, Benny," I conceded, "what time tonight?"

"Eleven-thirty. Can you slip out that late?"

"Yeah, eleven-thirty." We'd agreed to meet under the street light near the front gates. Then, when all was clear, we'd slip around to the side gate

between the Boggs house and Merrick place. Benny assured me, "There is a row of large cypress trees that will hide us. Once we jump the gate, it will be smooth sailing."

At exactly eleven-thirty I rounded the corner and waited under the light. It was quiet except for the summer breeze rustling errant tree limbs lining the street. After a few minutes alone, I began to have second thoughts. I felt like a grave robber. Benny was late but after fifteen minutes of pacing he arrived, sweating heavily. "What happened?" I asked.

"Almost got caught climbing out my bedroom window. It squeaked as my dad walked past my room. I jumped back into bed just before he checked on the noise."

"Whew," I said, shaking my head. "I was just about to leave...thought you chickened out."

"Nah, not me," he sniffled catching a dribble of snot on his sleeve, "I'm no chicken."

I laughed. "Yeah, I guess not, but I still have a funny feeling about this." Looking up at the tower window, a shiver ran up my spine and I felt the urge to piss my pants. Up above, one the gargoyles had shifted. It was now looking directly at us, its tongue hanging to the side, not straight as I had remembered earlier.

"Look Benny" I said, "doesn't that gargoyle look different to you now?" Benny gazed up scratching his head. "No, now let's get going." He dragged me along by the arm and as we reached the side gate my blood raced. The excitement of the caper took hold and adrenaline pumped furiously into all parts of my body. A sudden breeze chilled my bones adding to the mysterious feel of the adventure. Once inside the grounds, Benny quickly covered the distance to the side door. I followed behind, less confidently, aware of every shadow in the yard. It was late at night and no credible reason for someone to be hiding in the bushes or behind a tree, but my mind began to play tricks. As I caught up to Benny, he was jimmying the door. It opened and I remarked, "You're a pro at this, Benny." He turned and smiled. Once in the house, we found the kitchen a mess. Empty beer bottles, plastic bags, and cigarette butts were strewn everywhere. "Looks like we missed the fun," Benny whispered. "There's been a beer party and the slobs never bothered to clean up."

"Yeah, I guess so," I whispered. "Watch yourself; you don't want to get cut on broken glass." Benny didn't respond and went about his business looking for the stairway up to the third floor. As we climbed the stairs, creaks and groans followed every step. The circular stairway with its ornate banister showed its age. Halfway up the second flight one of the stairs treads gave way and Benny's left foot fell through. Briefly panicked, I raced up to help. "That was a scare," he chuckled. "Okay, now who's scared?" I asked.

At the top of the second flight, the hallway stretched out in two directions. Benny knew exactly which way to go, darting down the right

corridor. I followed behind, my eyes glancing around. There were four doors on each side and at its end, the hallway turned to the right. "This is it," Benny said, but I temporarily lost him when he made the turn. "Benny," I called. "Benny, are you there?" There was no response and as I made it to the corner, I froze. "Boo!" Benny's hands reached out and grabbed at me. Behind him, a whiff of dust appeared and I gasped, "Ayah!" Benny's reaction was swift. "Shhhh!" We were now just a few feet from the tower room and my companion was giddy. From the knapsack on his back Benny pulled out a hammer and cooed, "This is going to be easy. Now let's get to it. We've gotta find the attic stairs."

From my position in the hallway, I peered into the tower room. The door was open and an eerie light filtered into the hallway. I exclaimed, "See, the light? I told you that there was a light in that room earlier."

"Yeah" he answered, "but it's just the moonlight. Now quiet down and follow me." He pulled out his flashlight and searched along the ceiling. "Ah, here it is," he said. It was a trap door with a pull cord. "Now get on my shoulders and grab the cord." Reluctantly, I obliged. As I grabbed the rope and pulled, the door opened. The track slid down and a built-in ladder glided to the floor. "Yes," Benny exclaimed, and he bent over to ease me back to solid ground. The doorway to the attic was secure, but the black hole above seemed to go nowhere. Benny flashed his light up into the darkness. There was a scurrying above and Benny turned to me. "Rats?"

"Got me," I answered. "First one up's gotta chase them away," he proclaimed. "Be my guest," was all I could think to say.

Benny took charge, climbing up the ladder. Once up he called back, "Not rats, just pigeons roosting. We scared the piss out of them."

My fear subsided. Ever since I saw the movie, Ben I feared rats and I chuckled, thinking to myself, Ben - Benny? I followed more confidently then when we first arrived. Benny was first to the attic vent. He opened it, testing his weight on the round circular slatted fixture. Held at the pivot point by a half-inch metal rod, it swung easily. "That's how the pigeons get in," he said, pushing the vent up and down on the swivel. "Smart birds," I quipped. "Flying rats," he snarled back. "Got bird doo on my jacket sleeves. Okay, get over here and watch. I'm gonna slide onto the vent. Now when I get halfway out, hold onto my legs." I did as instructed. It was a cinch and on the first try Benny called out to me,

"Okay, I got it, now pull me in." As I slid his legs back onto the floor of the attic, I noticed the gargoyle. It was about eight inches wide and twelve inches long. Benny had pulled it off the dowel attaching it to the corbel. The whimsical face temporarily held me spellbound and suddenly I wanted one for myself. There was another out there within his reach. Benny asked, "Want one?" Shaking off the temptation, I decided, "No, no thanks. I'm not going out there." Benny laughed. "I'll do it. They pull off easy. The wooden dowel holding it was all cracked. It popped right off."

Something inside told me to get out of there. I didn't understand why, but my gut began to churn. I was feeling sick and the gargoyle's face only made the dread worsen. As Benny cradled the carving in his hand he felt strangely emboldened. "Well if you don't want the other one, I'll take it for myself and have a pair of 'em for my bookshelf." He turned, placing the carving on the floor and again slid onto the vent, this time more confident than ever. "I don't need your help," he called back, "Just watch."

Suddenly, I could tell that something was wrong. Benny began breathing hard and his legs squirmed as if he was struggling to get free from the vent. On the floor, the gargoyle's mouth began to change. It was moving, laughing now, and the uncurled tongue began to curl upward. I grimaced and backed away, hollering out to Benny, "What's going on?" Inside, his feet flailed about as he tried to grab onto the sides of the vent. Then he called back, "Something's pulling me out." I looked over the top and noticed a rope-like whiff of smoke. It held onto Benny's free hand. In the other, the second gargoyle's face changed. Its brow furrowed and the expression changed from whimsical to serious. I yelled, "Put it back," and I grabbed his legs. "Put it back, Benny," I screamed. Looking through the vent, I saw that he had not yet replaced the gargoyle. The creepy band of smoke still held firm. Gnarled fingers of smoky sinew crawled up his arm. Another wisp of smoke appeared out of the night and a grotesque demon head appeared. It wailed like a banshee straining mightily in an attempt to pull him through the vent. "Hold onto me," he screamed, "and don't let go." I tried, but my strength was no match for the powerful demon. Its bright red eyes gleamed in the dark and I feared that Benny was about to get his neck broken over an old wooden carving. Just as I began to lose my grip I saw the reflection of a light flickering against the attic ceiling. It was the same light that I noticed from the street hours before. The candle, held by the ghost of old lady Merrick, illuminated the attic space. Her shadow loomed above and I turned to face the threat. She approached her face milky white and dour. A high-necked nightgown flowed from around her translucent body. Disapprovingly, she frowned and shook her head as if to scold me for the intruding onto her property. I was a mere mortal, just a petty thief violating her home and I now feared for my own life. Benny was now nearly three quarters out of the vent. In moments, he'd be laying dead three stories below us.

"Help us," I screamed. Her face brightened, but she did not reply. I pleaded with the vision from the spirit world. "Please won't you help us?" My personal fear was overshadowed by the need for someone to help Benny, even if it was a ghost. He was in trouble and I could no longer manage to hold on. The demon holding him had evil intent and I turned back to the vent, tears streaming down my face. "Help me save my friend," I cried. Time was running out and the apparition did not seem to care. Her first intention was to scold me, "You two have come here to steal from me.

Why should I help?" Quickly, I answered, "I know about your boy...sorry for your loss." There was a sudden change and she softened. "Yes, my poor son, he rests now with his father."

She breezed past me, her arm reaching out for Benny's right leg. "Now let go," she said and I obliged. My hand released and it brushed against her gown. The icy cold took me and panic ensued. I began to get up to run, but she held me back.

"You cannot not leave your friend," she demanded. Benny was in grave danger, a demon pulling on him from one side of the vent and a ghostly lady tugging at the other. "Let him go you damned demon," I cursed. The ghost's grip tightened around Benny's leg and I could see that she was getting the upper hand. "Be gone from here," she commanded and the craggy fingers of the demon released.

Suddenly, the demonic aggressor gave way and faded into the night. Benny's body went limp but she held onto his legs. Slowly, the ghostly apparition brought Benny's listless body back into the attic. She laid him on the floor. Bending over, she touched his brow. A comb appeared and she ran it once through his hair. Placing the candle on the floor, she picked up Benny's stolen gargoyle. Her milky white body drifted through the attic wall and her hand affixed the gargoyle back onto its corbel. Flowing back into the attic space, she came to me. Her lips moved and I could not hear her speak, but the words formed in my head.

"My friends out there keep evil away from this house. My husband George had them added to protect us from the evil ones that prowl in the night. Demons have no power inside this house as long as the watchers keep guard." She gave me a smile. "Now take your friend and leave." Then she vanished. The candlelight flickered and everything went dark. Benny groaned and began to stir, but I heard a noise below us, first a bang, then footsteps coming up the stairs. My heart pounded heavily and I supposed that other ghostly figures were coming now to evict us. "Benny, Benny, get up," I whispered loudly. "We've gotta get outta here." He groaned again and then sat up. "What happened?" He could not remember getting stuck out on the attic vent and had no recollection of the demon that had him in its grip. All that he remembered was pulling off the first gargoyle and going out to get the second one.

"Where, where's my carving?" he stammered. "Forget it, Benny, let's go," I pleaded. The noise of the footsteps grew louder and as we finished our climb down the attic stair, I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Gotcha!" It was Jimmy, the older boy from next door. "What are you two kids doing here? This house is off limits, now let's go." I was glad to see a living human being and said,

"That old Mrs. Merrick told us to get out and we're getting out all right."

He laughed, "So you've seen old lady Merrick? I've often wondered if anyone else noticed her in the window." He began walking us down the stairs. "My bedroom faces the side yard and the tower room. Sometimes at night I can see her walking around, a candle in one hand and a comb in the other. My dad says that it's just my imagination, but I still look for her every night. Say, what were you two doing here anyway?"

Benny was still coming out of his stupor so I answered, "We tried to steal the gargoyles outside the attic vent. When Benny snatched the second one, he... he got stuck. I tried to pull him back, but it was old lady Merrick that saved him. Then she said to leave."

As we walked out of the house, Jimmy teased, "I guess that you'll have a great bedtime story to tell your children someday when you're all grown-up." Looking up at the tower, I thought I caught the faint glow of a lighted candle. "Yeah," I said, "some bedtime story." I don't think that Jimmy Boggs believed me, but that's of no consequence now. I learned a valuable lesson from the apparition at Merrick mansion. And the moral of this little story is clear - Evil lurks in wait for every fool, be it the wayward thief or that of a youthful prankster. The demon that I saw pulling my friend out of the vent may have been a figment of my imagination, but as for ghosts, I only know this... it's always nice to have one on your side.

The moral is: Don't mess with another's talisman of protection.

THESE DRUGS ARE LOVELY

Jason Hesse

The Blue Pluto soaked into his brain tissue like a wonder worker, eliminating the dreadful idea of what was waiting for him at the end of his trip. It was an illegal science but it was beautiful. If it weren't for his mother's insistence of a weekend visit, he probably wouldn't be hooked. It made her interesting or, at least, tolerable. These thoughts weaved violently in and out of his mind as he drove down the empty highway like it was a sad, forgotten country song.

His hands gripped the wheel tightly as he narrowed his view onto the little glass bottle with the eyedropper cap sitting on the passenger seat. The blue liquid inside had fallen victim to his appetites, he realized this now. He didn't obtain an additional bottle. The regret deepened the more the wheels kept spinning along the cracked asphalt of the road. His expression slowly turned to that of shock as if he was discovering a dying lover. Frustration began its ugly toll as he began to pound his fist on the steering wheel.

"Fuck!" he screamed. He looked at the bottle again. He calculated that there was maybe one or two more doses left. He loved Blue Pluto but it had its problem: it didn't last long, usually an hour to an hour and a half at the most. But he had to maintain, he couldn't kill the careless euphoria Blue Pluto had blessed him with.

Stiffened with a calmer demeanor, he looked at himself in the rear view mirror. He stared at his own eyes. The pupils had turned into a light, hazy blue. The idea of that had always scared him, it always seemed like a clear indicator of use. But like Blue Pluto itself, the effect didn't last. He looked back at the road. Maybe it's time to quit, he thought. He occasionally tricked himself into thinking that he'd stop one of these days. Maybe this is a sign, a train wreck I can't look away from. Maybe there's a reason why I forgot to get another bottle that was more than just a slipped thought. He began to think maybe it was time to give his mother the credit she deserved. She loved him, encouraged him, helped him. Her empty nest made her a shrew in his eyes. By his second year in school, her constant inquiry about when he was going to return home had become desperately frantic. Then he met Blue Pluto and that was when he gave his mother an answer.

The orange gas light began singing its little song.

He knew he could stop in Aberdale, it was a small, rural town that he started to admire the more he passed through it on these weekend trips. Just a couple more miles.

The town seemed unusually quiet. There were no vehicles on the road, there were no people. Must be a local gathering at the town square. A

strange buzz rang in his ear. He shook his head as if he was warding off guilty truths about himself. There, that helped. He pulled into the lot of the gas station. He always loved small town gas stations and this one in particular. It was a dusty antique. He turned the ignition off and looked at Blue Pluto. I'm serious this time. He took it in his hand and made a fist around it and got out of the car.

He walked around and began the process of filling up the tank. He looked around at the surrounding town engulfed by a eerie beauty. He shot a glance back at the station and observed that no one was there. Maybe the guy working is taking a shit. He chuckled to himself at the thought of that. Blue Pluto was wearing off. He glanced at the bottle in his hand and felt it's weight. It was heavier at the beginning of the trip. The noise came back, its volume rising gradually. He shook his head again but, to no avail, the noise was still there. Its ringing drone sounded unearthly.

He focused his attention on Blue Pluto. That last dose making waves at the bottom of the bottle, teasing him, wanting to become a part of him. He looked around to see if anyone was in eyeshot, opening the bottle and drew in the remaining blue liquid into the dropper. He tilted his head back and stared up at Blue Pluto in this hand with the sunny sky behind it. He reminded himself that this is the last time and that research showed that withdraw wasn't so bad. It was a clever concoction. Quickly but carefully, he released the liquid into his eyes. There it was that feeling of Eden. Now he officially didn't care about a thing in the world.

Except for that sound. It was so distant yet curious. It was calling him but Blue Pluto was the secretary holding all calls. The fuel had stopping pumping and the total came to \$23.54. He placed the empty bottle in his breast pocket, a reminder of broken promises. He walked into the station and looked for any signs of life. Nothing. The former Boy Scout in him couldn't just leave. He left \$25 on the front counter and walked back outside. He realized the noise never left him. Despite sounding so distant, the volume was the same inside the station. But it was still calling him. Curiosity got him walking. He walked a few blocks down the road and made a turn left on Hammer Street. It was getting louder. He followed the sound as if he was following an object, like he knew where to find it. This is strange, he kept thinking with every step. The sound was so intriguing like it was toying with him.

Along the way, he discovered cars parked in the middle of the streets, doors left open and engines idling. Front doors of houses were also left hanging open. The normalcy of small town life?

It was an ideal American town but something was troubling. The noise was becoming louder; a buzz of insanity except something was different as he neared the source. A deep rhythmic blast that sounded, to him, sounded like a motorized explosion. He continued walking. He was getting close. The sound of the buzz mixed into the sound of grinding gears.

Every minute, the explosion was heard again. He kept looking up to see smoke billowing but saw nothing but blue sky.

He came across a row of houses and was certain the source was behind them. He hurried his pacing and cut through between them. Behind the houses were a large cluster of trees. He slowed his stance down when approached. He had made it. Blue Pluto and all the excitement was about to make his heart burst. He stopped at a tree and rested beside it. In front of him was a large field used as a park. The noise was now an intoxicating terror. It must be over that hill. He remained cautious and walked along the tree line, attempting to be vigilant.

At first, it was merely townspeople he saw, hundreds of them. They remained silent though. Another explosion, this time more deafening and odd. Where the fuck is that coming from and what the fuck is it? He continued through the trees and then he saw it.

A large machine burrowed into the ground. Mounds of ground-up earth pressed against it, metallic and dirty, like it was birthed out of the earth. There was a circular shaped opening, like a mouth, with a yellowish orange light emitting from it. A fiery path that looked like it would take an eternity to walk, leading to the Underworld. Even at a distance, he could feel the intense heat coming off the machine.

A dark, ungodly figure walked out from behind. It looked as if it stood twelve feet tall as it gingerly approached the crowd of townsfolk. They seemed unfazed by its appearance. The decayed demon flesh clinging to its monstrous skeleton. The black eyes and teeth, the horns. The tattered rags of cloths that it may have been wearing for eons. It beckoned the crowd and they it gave it want and desire.

It opened its arms like a circus ringmaster, inviting the silently anxious group. With a gentle motion, four people stepped up. A middle-aged man and woman, a boy in his mid-teens and a girl who looked about ten. The man and woman holding hands as they all walked to the entrance. The furnace-like heat blowing their hair and clothes back with fury. They stepped inside, smiling and began to faintly glow an angelic white. The noise began to swell, beginning to erupt.

As he observed in the humid dark of the bushes, he didn't even see it coming. A sound wave blasted out the entrance of the machine. The family was transformed into a mass of bloodied gore that was projected towards the people of this town. Destroyed pieces of human remains flung through the air landing in a twisted heap of ripped skin, bone fragments and chunks of entrails. A blood-covered spine hit an elderly woman in the face. Half of the little girl's fleshless skull landed on a police officer's foot, her liquefied brain pouring into his shoe. All that remained at the entrance of the machine was four auras of light that were of heavenly white.

Even far away in the bushes, he felt the ethereal presence of their souls. Souls stripped and torn away from their human shells. He could feel

them begin to tremble in fear at the realization of their fate. The sound of the blast still quaked. All of a sudden, the sound and light were sucked back into the machine. The demon collected them with a smirk.

He still watched. It was the most horrific sight he'd ever seen. Nothing could compete, nothing could ever compete.

"Hey", he heard from behind.

Startled, he turned around and found a young woman lazily looking at him.

"Hi", he sarcastically replied. "Do you mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"Oh, this has been going for an hour or so now."

"What is it?"

"I don't really know. That sound started up and everyone came here."

He was still in disbelief but Blue Pluto was helping him through this tough sight. He turned back to witness the elderly woman who was hit with the spine step up. She was holding hands with an elderly gentleman. They gazed at each other, smiling. Their whole lives, leading to this.

He turned his head when the blast came, the sloppy sound of their earthly bodies hit the ground.

"Where did it come from?"

As he placed his view on the woman, he noticed she too was Blue Pluto's friend. Her pupils were beginning to turn back to their normal hue.

"I was just out here, enjoying the day. Then the ground started to shake and that machine busted up through the ground. It was actually a pretty cool thing to see",

He brushed off her observation. Through her behavior, he knew all that he needed to know. He knew the Blue Pluto was keeping them alive and protecting their minds. But it wouldn't be long before Blue Pluto had left her high and dry. He knew he still had a short while before Ol' Blue left him too.

"Come on, I think it's in our best interest to leave while we can."

"Really? I'm kind of liking it here."

"I'm serious, we need to get out of here", he said, getting up and grabbing her arm.

"No! It's starting to sound beautiful. My family is down there and I think I'm going to join them."

She walked away but he didn't care. Thank you, Blue. Walking towards the crowd, she spun around. "I'll see you later", she said in a gleeful sense that made him uncomfortable. It was sinister.

He began his trek to the gas station. Hopefully, I'll get several miles away before you leave me, Blue. Every idiosyncratic landmark seemed more glorious than the last as he made his way back to the station. Second by second, the world and the lives in it mattered more to him. He hoped to see his mother again as he spotted his car at the gas station. Silent, only except

for the drone and the soul-shattering explosions that were quickly sucked back into the hellish pathway. Maybe it's the Devil's little secret.

The sound was still in his ear as he ran up to his car. He turned the ignition and turned up the stereo to full volume, hoping to drown it out. He could sense Blue Pluto was fading and the buzz still remained. He checked his eyes in the mirror. Fading to black.

He sped down the highway like it was a sad, forgotten classic rock song. Exhaustively laughing, he took the empty bottle from his pocket and kissed it. I owe you everything. Five miles from that literal hellhole and we're still talking, Blue.

Blue?

His smile disappeared. He slowed the car almost to a screeching halt. He left it running as he opened the door and began walking back towards Aberdale.

I'll see you later. Indeed!

Blue Pluto didn't leave him completely. It let him have a final thought before the buzzing noise sliced through his mind. He remembered life as a small child in school.

I always hated being last in line.

The moral is: Beware the 12 steps downward to addiction.

BLOOD, BODIES, AND WISHES

Suzanne Robb

Staring at the screen Mike wanted to shoot himself. He hadn't written anything in months, his publisher was breathing down his neck, and bills were adding up. Problem was he had nothing left in him to write about. He had written over twenty-five novels, but was mediocre at best. He had never made a best sellers list, and as of late he simply felt empty inside.

Turning off the computer he stood up and walked over to the bar. He poured himself a glass of scotch and downed it in one swig. He poured another and downed that one too. He took a look around his apartment. It was minimally decorated, but spacious. Today however he felt the walls closing in on him.

He needed to get out, have some fun. Picking up his phone he called his best friend Kyle. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey what's up?"

"I want to go out and forget about my life for a night, you up for it?"

"You buying?"

"As always."

"Then I'm in, meet you at Los Lobos at nine."

Pressing end on his cell phone Mike felt better now that he had plans for the night. He just had to figure out what to do with his afternoon. He walked over to the couch and turned on the T.V. Flipping through the channels for a good twenty minutes, he decided nothing was on.

Looking at his bookshelf, there was nothing he wanted to read. In fact he didn't want to think about books at all. He stared at the ceiling and after an hour of restless tossing and turning got up. He grabbed his favourite leather jacket and left his apartment.

Walking down the street he went to his favourite local bar, his haven away from home. Usually he could come here, watch a few of the local characters, have some chats and he had an idea for a story. This time it wasn't helping, he was coming here to get drunk plain and simple.

Walking into the dimly lit bar he headed over to his usual spot. It was a booth in the back corner that had a view of the whole place. Taking a seat on the cracked vinyl he motioned to the bartender. He didn't need to order here, within seconds Tammy the waitress brought over his drink.

Tammy was a nice woman who had a hard life. Each wrinkle had some sad story to go with it. He always asked how she was, even though she always had the same answer. Tonight her roots were showing, and press on nails were chipped and unpainted.

"Hey Mike, how are things?" She asked in a voice made husky by years of smoking.

"Been better, been worse, how about you?"

"Same old same old, my feet are killing me, kids are sucking all my money up, and my ex is an asshole." She gave him a seductive smile that showed yellowed teeth and receding gums.

"Wish I could help..." Tammy just gave a sad laugh and walked away.

Mike was on his third drink when the man walked in. He was dressed completely in black and walked with a cane. He had never seen him before. There was something unusual about him, something that made him stick out. Mike was oddly drawn to this mysterious man.

He watched as the man sat in the booth opposite him, staring straight at him. It was planned, he was trying to make Mike uncomfortable, or pique his curiosity. This bizarre staring contest went on for ten minutes.

Alright curiosity piqued.

Mike stood up and motioned to the bartender. He took the few steps necessary to reach the booth the man was sitting at.

"Mind if I have a seat?"

The man looked up and Mike got a good look at him in the light. He was average in all ways, leathery skin, mid-forties, brown eyes that seemed lifeless, and if Mike believed in such things a dark aura.

"Go ahead." The man motioned that Mike was welcome to sit.

"I'm Mike, haven't seen you in here before."

"I haven't been in here before. Do you approach all new people, or am I special?"

Mike couldn't tell if the man was making fun of him or not.

"No, just the ones that intrigue me. I'm a writer and am always on the lookout for new ideas."

"Well I hope you are here for stories and nothing more, I don't swing that way." The man smiled, but it wasn't friendly.

"No no, it's just for stories trust me." Mike shifted uncomfortably.

"So Mike what kind of stories do you like?"

"Any kind, but what I usually write is sci-fi or horror."

"Anything I would have heard of?"

"Doubt it, I'm not very well known."

"Then why do it?"

"Well I make enough to pay the bills, and I love it. It's my passion, or at least it was."

"Writers block?"

"No, I think it's more like empty block. I feel like all the stories are gone."

"Well just find some more."

Mike laughed. He nodded towards the bar tender for another drink. For some reason as strange as this man was, he was easy to talk to.

"It's not that easy, if it was I'd be at home right now doing it."

"Not true, to find stories you have to go out and live, experience things."

"I did that for most of my youth, that's where most of my stories did come from. It's just that the stories I want to write, I want them to feel real. I want them to have the ring of authenticity to them."

"Well they tell you to write what you know, start with that."

"I would, but I don't know a whole lot, not to mention that sci-fi and horror are hard things to know about."

"That is not true at all, you can learn about all the horror you want." The man smiled, it did not reach his eyes.

"Well sure, there's movies and getting married that can teach you about horror." Mike laughed at his joke, the man didn't.

"I could help you learn about horror. I could help you learn things that would make you a best-selling writer."

"Okay teach me then if you know so much." Mike challenged him; he had had too much to drink and was beginning to feel ornery.

"I can't teach you, you have to learn on your own. In order to do that though you need to ask me to help you, kind of like making a wish."

This guy is nuts.

"So all I have to do to learn all I want about horror to become a best-selling writer is make a wish?"

The man smiled again, this time it did reach his eyes. It was a scary sight. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a card. He put it on the table and slid it over to Mike.

"This is my card, when you want my help call the number on it."

Mike picked up the card and looked at it. It was a simple business card, no name, just a number.

"That's it; just give you a call and all my dreams come true?"

The man looked at Mike, his face was dead serious.

"There will be a price to pay, but then again nothing is free is it?" A hint of a ghostly smile crossed the man's face.

"Let me guess, I have to sell you my soul or something." Was this guy for real?

"I assure you it will be nothing that cliché, nor that simple. Call when you're ready." The man rose and left without another word.

* * *

Mike watched as the man left. He was actually considering calling the number so he decided he was drunk enough for the night. Staggering home

he thought of how many times he had wished that the books he had worked on would be best sellers, hundreds of times, maybe thousands?

Opening the door to his apartment he made it as far as the couch before he had to sit down. His apartment was spinning in the most annoying way. He took the card out of his pocket in an attempt to focus on something.

"What the hell." He called the number expecting it to be a pizza place, or an escort service of some kind.

Mike was more than a little surprised when the man answered. He was about to ask for him by name, but realized he had never learned it. How odd for a writer to not get a detail like that.

No wonder my books suck, I miss the details.

"Okay help me if you can."

"You are prepared to pay whatever price I want?"

"Yes."

"You must say it." Mike took a moment to make sure this was what he wanted.

"I am willing to pay you whatever price you want."

"It is done." The line went dead.

Mike tried to redial the number but got a recording saying it was no longer in service.

How much did I drink tonight?

Manoeuvring himself to his bed, his last thoughts were of the man in black and what the price was going to be.

* * *

The phone was ringing incessantly. He looked over at the clock and saw that it was eleven o'clock.

"Hey, I'm sorry I didn't show, I fell asleep." Mike noticed a knife covered in blood on his nightstand.

"Whatever, make it up to me tonight. I can tell you all about this chick I hooked up with."

Mike was silent for a full minute. He tried to remember what happened. Did he have too much to drink? He had been drinking more than usual. Looking down at his hands he saw that they were covered in blood. That had to be it; he had a blackout, a really really bad blackout.

"I gotta go." He pressed end on his phone, shoved it in his pocket.

Mike sat up slowly and threw his legs over the side of the bed.

Looking down he noticed he was wearing a different outfit than the one from the night before, he also noticed that it was covered in blood. Standing up he began to feel the stirrings of fear in his stomach.

What the hell happened here? What did I do?

A trail of blood led to the bathroom. Steering clear of stepping in it he

followed the drips and splatter to the bathroom. There was blood all over the floor, sink, and walls.

Mike was starting to panic, his stomach felt like it was full of eels and he felt cold fingers running up and down his spine.

What the hell happened? He left the bathroom and almost threw up at what he saw on the bed. He had been so focused on the knife and trail of blood he never thought to look and see if he was perhaps sharing the bed with someone.

There on his bed was a woman, no not just a woman; it was Tammy, the waitress from the bar. Her head was at such an odd angle that Mike had no idea how it was still on the body.

She was naked, but it hardly mattered, blood painted her entire body. There were slashes, gashes, and stab wounds everywhere. Her eyes wide open looking directly at him. Her face was frozen in fear. A million different thoughts were running through Mike's mind, none of them made sense.

He remembered the bar, the strange man, the card, and calling him. It couldn't be real. He had no memory of what happened after that. He had to fix this; he had to hide the evidence.

Entering full panic mode and not thinking clearly Mike began to take off his clothes. He made a pile in the middle of his room and ran into the kitchen. Grabbing a trash bag he returned to his room and began shoving his clothes inside of it.

He found the clothes of the dead waitress and threw them in the bag also. Wiping down the knife he tossed it into the bag also.

When Mike grabbed the body he threw up when the last bit of sinew snapped and her head fell off. It landed between his feet, looking up at him. Pulling himself together he dragged the body into the bathroom and put her into the tub.

He knew he would have to deal with that, but right now he was more concerned with cleaning the bedroom of all evidence of what he did.

Stripping his bed of all the sheets he saw that the blood had soaked through to the mattress that was going to be a problem, he just added it to the list of problems.

Returning to the kitchen he grabbed rubber gloves and cleaning supplies. He didn't know what to do. Movies made this look so easy. He started with the nightstand and quickly discovered that congealed blood was not very easy to clean.

Kneeling down on the carpet he tried to clean the trail and again found it to be too difficult. He would just have to rip it out and replace it.

Heading into the bathroom he scrubbed the tile floor and the sink. At least the ceramic surfaces were easy, but the grout was another issue. He was going to have to buy several gallons of bleach.

Mike sighed in defeat, and sat on the toilet as he stared at the body. What the hell am I going to do?

The number, I'll call the number. This is obviously a sick joke by that guy from last night. He dialled the number and got the same recording as the night before.

"Shit!"

His thoughts were racing as he tapped his foot. What the hell was going on? Then out of nowhere a thought came to him, "go to your computer." He knew it was the voice of the man.

What the hell?

Standing up Mike went to his computer. It was open and there was text on the screen. He sat down and began reading. He read a story about a writer who wasn't very good, but wanted to be. A writer who went to a bar and met an intriguing man, a man who had piqued his interest.

The man offered the writer an opportunity to become better, an offer of help as it were. The writer after much deliberation called the man and asked for his help. As soon as the man agreed to pay whatever price was asked the deal was done.

Now the writer was a vessel for the man he had met that night. The man was something other; he was a demon from another world that could only make short appearances in this world. When he did he would seek out desperate wishes and needs.

He would make them an offer to help those wishes come true. There was a price of course, but the men always agreed to pay it, they were desperate after all.

From now on when the demon felt his darn need arise he would take over the man, occupy his body fully. Control him in every way. He would fulfill his need to murder and mutilate, disembowel, or eviscerate depending on his mood. As payment for being the vessel the writer would recall every horrific detail and write about it in detail.

His writing will seem so real, and be written from such a unique perspective that he will become a best seller. The deal will last until the end of the writers' life, which he cannot take by his own hands. The writer will also be protected from being caught, unless he tells anyone about their deal.

Mike finished reading and didn't know what to do. At first he didn't believe what he had read, but looking down at his hands he knew it was true. He had made a wish with a demon.

He stood up to go and look in the bathroom and found it was empty. Looking around the bathroom and bedroom there was no evidence whatsoever that a crime had ever taken place.

Mike grabbed his bottle of scotch and sat at the computer. He opened up a new page and began to write. The words flowed like they never had before. He was another person; he was a killer, writing from that perspective.

He was stalking Tammy as she got off work, it wasn't his first time. In fact he had done this hundreds of times. The police had never caught him,

and they never would. He loved this, the chase. It aroused him and enflamed his need.

He surprised the waitress from behind enjoying the look of fear in her eyes. Knocking her out he took her back to his apartment where he could do what he needed in privacy. He felt like using a knife tonight.

He began to stab her repeatedly. Each thrust of the knife calming the need within him, each stab causing blood to pour out of her. Her eyes were begging and pleading him to stop, filling with pain, and then going lifeless.

Stripping her down, he admired his handiwork. She had been stabbed thirty-seven times, that was his lucky number. He made sure to use the excess blood to paint her entire body. There was something about that repetitive motion that calmed him and made it easier for him to go back to normal.

His need was fulfilled for now, as the darkness receded he got sleepy. Crawling into bed next to the body he curled up and went to sleep. Thoughts of darkness and death calming him.

Mike wrote all of it, the details, the feelings, the emotions, everything that the killer was feeling. He had never written like this before. He created a back story of a drifter that went from town to town, framing locals for his misdeeds.

As he read what he wrote he felt sick knowing his hands had committed the crime, but that was what the scotch was for. Eventually he would drink enough to be numb, enough to not feel sick when he thought of what his hands had done, enough not to care anymore.

This was going to be a best-seller after all.

The moral is: Evil wishes, like chickens, come home to roost.

IF YOU EVER MEET A GIRL NAMED MAISIE MAE

Nathan Robinson

MISSbuttereyes99:) writes- hav u eva seen that film?

MRKNOWITALL writes- nt yt.

MISSbuttereyes99:) writes- wnt 2 c it? My mates say it's 2 scary n ive no1 2 go wiv now!

MRKNOWITALL writes- my dad got it on pirate but wud mucho rather c it in 3D.

MISSbuttereyes99:) writes- me 2! 3D rocks. checkd times show at 7.30 if ya fancy it?

MRKNOWITALL writes- Yeah defo, shud b gud. Cnt wate!!

MISSbuttereyes99:) writes- ok. C u there! Cnt wate 2 meet u finally.

MRKNOWITALL writes- likewise. Be there about 7ish so that we can get a good seat.

MISSbuttereyes99:) writes- got to go 4 t now c ya later shane!!!

MRKNOWITALL writes- bye bye buttereyes.

PRIVATE CHAT ENDED

LOG OFF

YES/NO

* * *

Lupo drummed his hairy digits on the dash. She was late. He hated been made to wait. The incessant rain beat down on the roof of the car, the waterfall of pattered white noise increasing his frustration further

He said seven.

It was now twenty past.

How did she ever in her tiny mind expect to make the show arriving so late.

Typical female. Probably still at home doing her makeup like a dammed whore.

He cracked his knuckles, cracked his neck then stretched his legs, pushing his heavy form back into the straining leather of the driver's seat.

The collecting droplets of rain blurred the windscreen, marring his view of the neon rich, cinema entrance. He tapped the wiper switch and the blades dispensed the moisture in a single swoop.

There she was. Just walking towards him now.

He hurriedly started the engine and pulled the car forward so he was now up next to her, winding the electric window down as they drew level with each other. Lupo forged a friendly smile, baring his teeth.

"Miss Butter Eyes I presume?"

She stopped in her tracks, turning to his call and bringing her head closer to the window. She didn't even think to carry an umbrella, the silly little girl, just a backpack. Even in the orange glow of the streetlight he could see how beautiful she was.

And how young.

"Yeah, maybe, why?" she answered coolly, pulling the electric pink hooded top closed tighter around the Fallout Boy t-shirt she had on beneath. He knew she was a big fan of Fallout Boy, this was her. He guessed her eyes to be baby blue.

"I'm Shane's Dad, Mr Terry. I came to tell you that he can't make it tonight, he's a bit ill."

"Oh, that's a bit of a bummer, is he okay?"

"Yeah just a stomach bug, he tried ringing but couldn't get through, kept going to voicemail he said."

"Yeah my battery is dead, I'm always forgetting to charge it, I'm such a dumbass sometimes!" she admitted with a goofy smile.

"I'm sure you're not. Anyway listen, Shane's got the film on DVD, I have a friend who works here, gets me all the latest films, so the wife and me don't ever have to leave the house. If you want you're more than welcome to come back get dry and watch the film in the back room with Shane. He's ever so sorry he couldn't make it. I blame the wife's cooking, she could burn water!"

Miss Butter Eyes smiled at this. A gap showed on her front two teeth. Christ it was cute. He quivered a little, hoping he didn't let it show.

"I can drop you back off home later if you want, save you getting drenched. I don't mind at all."

"Hmmm, okay. But I do really want to meet Shane."

"Jump in then, before you get even wetter."

Miss Butter Eyes opened the door and tossed in her backpack as he flicked the switch for the window, it's drone cancelling out the rush of the rain outside. Once she was safely inside the car the doors locked automatically.

"You want to phone your Mum and Dad, tell them what's happening? You can borrow my phone if you want."

"Mum and Dads dead. I live with foster parents now."

Lupo handed over his mobile to her.

"All the same, ring them and let them know you're safe."

She took the phone and said with a weak little smile, "thank you."

He watched the screen light up and she began to dial before putting the phone to her ear. No signal. She tried the number again.

Lupo smiled patiently. He had switched the phone to flight mode before she got into the car, no incoming or outgoing calls without turning it off and back on again, then entering the four digit pass code.

"No signal?" he queried innocently.

"Looks that way."

"Probably the weather. Never mind, you can use the house phone when we get back. It's only a ten-minute drive. There's a bottle of Diet Coke in the foot well that Shane bought earlier, you're welcome to have a drink if you're thirsty."

"Thank you," the young girl reached around blindly into the dark of the foot well, her fingers found the bottle. She twisted off the cap and brought it to her lips, supping back the sugary fluid. Too easy.

He pushed his eyes to the side, away from the dangers of the slick road to watch her neck move, gulp and pull the liquid down her delicate, pale throat.

"So you got a name Miss Butter Eyes? Or do me and the missus just call you Butter?"

The girl removed the bottle from her little lips with a smile, "Maisie Mae."

"Maisie Mae?" he repeated it a few more times in his head, somehow, from somewhere in the distant corners of his mind, a sing song nursery rhyme entered his head.

"If you ever meet a girl named Maisie Mae..."

He smiled again, for his own pleasure this time. Unconsciously tonguing an ulcer on the side of his mouth brought him a tingle of pain. He bit into it. Nibbled away at the wet, ulcerous flesh, bringing the taste of copper blood into his mouth. His thick fingers gripped the wheel in frustration as he turned onto a straight, leaving the lights of town behind. The safe lights.

God he was ready for this.

"We live just a little ways out of town. Not far now."

She smiled once dreamily then turned back to looking out the rain-splattered window. He kept on watching her, only for a moment, didn't want to scare her too soon. Back home, everything was ready. It would be perfect, a most excellent night of succulent delights, he had already decided that he would take his time with this beauty, not rush it; savour it.

It hadn't taken long this one. The quickest by far. She seemed quite eager to meet Shane, the distraction had held.

"Just round this next corner," he assured her.

She offered a tired grunt, barely moving her head from off the cool plane of the window. The Coke ploy had worked. It had really knocked her out quick. He hadn't long.

He upped his speed and arrived home faster than he thought possible. The empty farmhouse greeted him with a single lighted eye from the bedroom; kept on with the radio at half blast to deter any would be intruders.

A nervous sense of anticipation over took him as he rushed round to her door and helped her to her feet and out of the car.

"Looks like Shane is up in his room, you go straight up if you want."

Through glazed eyes she tried to focus, she wanted to reply but the drug had its grip on her. Good. Not a struggler this time. At first he preferred them to lay back and be quiet while he got on with the job, they could scream all they wanted later. He checked over his shoulder to make sure they weren't followed as he led her towards the house.

With his giant hands, Lupo fumbled the key in the lock, tried it twice. Wouldn't turn. Cursed then turned it the other way, kicking it open and pushing her inside. Nervous excitement was getting the better of him.

"SHANE! SHANE, SHE'S HERE!" he shouted theatrically up the stairs.

Miss Butter Eyes smiled, a spider silk thin line of dribble hung from her young pink mouth that sent him wild inside with expectant animal lust. The hungry and baying beast inside him salaciously suggested that he lean in and lick it off her burning hot teen lips, taste her essence, while a throb swelling up in his pants told him to adjust himself

Now he had her in artificial light he could see she wasn't older than thirteen, fourteen at a push. Electric pink streaks through her jaunty, punk rocker black hair cut confirmed her childishness, she had on one of them studded black leather belts with a skull and crossbones buckle, that would look good as a leash, pulled tight around her slender neck while he...

Enough, he thought cutting off his fantasy mid flow, he had to get her downstairs first, where it was safe.

"You okay?" he asked, her eyes didn't catch on to his, and instead she stared vaguely at the floorboards at her feet.

"Tired," she whispered, almost a guilty confession.

"You should lay down. I have somewhere for you too sit, rest your tired feet I'll help you then I'll go get Shane."

"Sounds good to us but..." she swayed on her feet, lurching towards the wall, sensing that she was about to cause herself harm, Lupo thrust forward in a parry, catching her under the arms.

“WOAH! You nearly hurt yourself there Missy Butter Eyes. C'mon I'll show you something cool in the basement.”

Without any effort or unnecessary noise, Lupo lifted her over his shoulder and carried her towards the doorway under the stairs. With a tug of a grimy, yellowed and well-used piece of string, the worn smooth wooden stairs became duly illuminated. Lupo took the first two steps, carefully turned as to not bang Maisie Mae's head on the bare brick wall, and locked the door, leaving the key in the lock. He turned and started his descent only to feel the girl stretch, slightly slowing his descent. He turned back to see her fingers weakly grasping the door handle to the outside world.

“Phone...” she managed to say, an effort that seemed to sap at her energies.

“The phones down stairs,” he assured her with a wicked laugh that echoed into nothing; He jolted forward, pulling her free from her last handhold.

The basement he kept clean. No spider webs, no dust and certainly no DNA, he wiped everything down after each “trip” including the dentist chair.

Years ago he spied it at an auction and simply had to have it.

Lot 27, he remembered with fondness.

It held a power, the steel framework, the patches of torn leather; it commanded something, not an evil, not a respect, no not demanding in any way. A pull, yes a pull. It wanted to be used. It had a purpose. And the second Lupo decided that he would place the highest bid for that worn out dentist chair, he knew what its purpose would be.

He got it cheaper than he would have paid for it, dragged it home like a prize kill and cleaned it down with bleach to remove the remnants of its previous purpose, covering the torn parts with shiny black duct tape and installing it lovingly in the centre of his basement, surrounded by five hi-definition digital video cameras attached to the exposed ceiling joists.

Aside from the dentist chair covered in a fresh, thin clear sheet of polythene, was a large wooden wardrobe for his “things” and a desk with a glowing laptop awaiting his command. This was all he needed to document the evening's proceedings.

In the corner beneath the wooden basement steps sat an antique Belfast sink for cleaning himself up afterwards before he headed back upstairs.

He removed her backpack and slung in the corner, then Lupo gently lay Maisie Mae in the dentist chair and pulled off her pink hooded top over the top of her head like flayed skin. The t-shirt clung tight to her lithe teenage body, a slight promise of tiny breasts hid beneath the Fallout Boy logo, something stirred happily at the promise of her soft pink peaks. He like them small, not flat, not an ironing board. Just a hint of womanhood

was all he needed to get his kicks. He ran a hand over the fabric above, pausing deliberately and teasing himself. He smiled and moved on to her face, stroking away the pink and black strands of hair that had become glued by a nervous sweat to her forehead. One eye was closed; the other struggled in a losing battle to stay open.

Give in, he willed.

"It'll be easier on you in the long run. If your nice to me, I mean really, really nice, I might give you another shot in an hour or two so you don't wake up halfway through like that last silly bitch. Ruined my flow. Mmmm, maybe I will, Maybe I won't. We'll see how rambunctious you get eh?"

"Phone..." Maisie repeated the last thing she said.

"No phone home Eee Tee,"

Lupo loved to tease. He'd been like this at school when he'd tear through girls' bags, eviscerating the contents, spilling their secrets on the corridor floor. One time he found a pack of sanitary towels amongst the spillage, so held the girl down and stuck them all over her face. His friends laughed, egging him on. He took it further, reaching under her dress and pulling out the one she wearing. She screamed and he felt half disgusted half turned on by the sight of that smear of thick maroon blood. The girl screamed louder, managing to wiggle free she launched a kick to his crotch, fuming, Lupo mashed the tainted towel into her face, polluting her shy look with her own mess. He threatened worse if she told anyone; she cried and ran home, a week later dying of embarrassment, by downing three bottles of aspirin and one of daddy's bottles of Jack Daniels.

Bending down he picked up his latest roll of duct tape and pulled out a piece the full length of his arm span, wrapping it tight around the wrist above her clenched fist. Fixing her solid to the dentist chair, so she became an extension of its being. He repeated this for the other wrist, although this fist seemed a lot more relaxed. He put it down the drugs reacting with different sides of the brain. He left her legs free as he needed to get in there later.

Lupo headed over to the computer and started his program. Each of the five cameras flickered to life. All his own design; God, he was some sort of a genius. The cameras were now rolling, one in front, one behind, one left, one right and one directly above Maisie Mae's face to capture every last moment of detail.

Each of the five angles had now opened up in different windows on his laptop in nipple sharp high definition. Every second recorded straight onto his hard drive forever and ever with the other hours of footage he had collected over the years. He and the others traded films over the net. Sometimes watching somebody else do it was just as exciting. Some even paid for the privilege. Paid well indeed.

In the face on angle, Maisie Mae opened her eyes fully and stared straight at him through the screen.

Lupo whipped his head round almost straining his neck in the process. Her head lolled lazily to one side, she had dribbled again. He turned back to the screen to where it still proved true.

Maybe his eyes had played tricks.

With the program compiling the images megabyte by megabyte and the cameras witness to everything, Lupo wandered back into shot. He stroked Maisie Mae's forehead again, wiping the sweat onto his fingers, he brought the moisture to his lips and licked the absorption off of his guilty fingerprints.

She tasted different from the rest, and not good different. It wasn't salty in anyway. Not the sweet pungency of youth that he would happily drink up all day from every crevice and orifice. Not poison. Not even distasteful, just wrong.

He spat what was in his mouth onto the floor.

This taste unsettled him.

So much so he headed over to the sturdy Belfast sink and washed his hands and dried them softly on the towel. Then he squirted washing up liquid on them and cleansed himself once again. He filled his mouth with cold water and swilled out his bitter mouth, repeatedly spitting to flush out the taste that had settled on his numbing tongue. Then he swallowed a bit too wet his whistle. The taste of diseased and stagnant water still remained in his throat somehow.

He went back over to Maisie, this time taking the towel with him, dabbing away the offensive seepages from her brow.

Time to get on with it.

He kissed her; the bad taste had gone now, it made him happier to forget the image that had materialized in his head.

"You may notice that I haven't taped your mouth shut. The reason for this is I really don't mind you screaming. The walls and ceilings are acoustically insulated and the nearest neighbours are half a mile away. I'm not expecting visitors any time soon, so please, scream all you want. In fact, I encourage it."

She murmured.

"Now, I'm going to get a beer, and then we'll get started, okay?"

She groaned this time.

Lupo lumbered back up the stairs to the doorway and reached in the dimness for the key in the lock. His fat searching fingers felt smooth brass and no protrusion, just an empty key-shaped hole. The key had gone, must have fallen out when he closed the door, keys do that sometimes.

He tried the door anyway.

Locked, as he expected, but not hoped.

Lupo span on the spot and headed back down the steps to the basement.

Miss Butter eyes was wide awake.

She stared straight at him.

The second thing he noticed was her free hand raised in front of her face, a sticky bangle of torn tape stuck to her wrist and a shiny brass key in her fingers. Maisie Mae smiled, and then dropped the key into her mouth and down her once delicate throat.

Lupo surged forward like a late train, his thick arms poised to grab her. With a single swipe she knocked him down to the concrete floor, scraping his arms and elbows across the harsh surface as he skidded.

Impossible.

The second band of tape ripped just as easily as the little girl raised her arm with no effort at all. On his back, Lupo scurried towards the wardrobe, he had tools in there.

Maisie lifted her top and tossed it to the floor, revealing a tight pink bra.

"I'm not expecting any visitors, so please, scream all you want," he heard himself say, but his lips hadn't moved. Maisie's had, she had imitated his voice far too perfectly.

"In fact, I encourage it."

Lupo let out a terrified little shriek as she advanced in a slow and deliberate strut. With probing fingers he reached inside the bottom drawer of the wardrobe and yanked out the battery powered angle grinder. The sight of this did nothing to deter her, though it brought a measure of comfort to Lupo as he started it up, the blade whirled deafeningly to life.

"I'll... I'll cut you..." he promised with a trembling shout.

Maisie Mae smiled; the once innocent baby blue had flushed from her eyes, now replaced with a complete yellow ball, no pupil, just pus yellow. Rotten butter yellow.

Miss Butter Eyes.

Now he got that one.

Her smile had changed too, her mouth had somehow got bigger to accommodate her arsenal of perfect and pointed teeth.

Like frightened prey, he struck out with the grinder, Maisie snatched it by the blade, mangling her fingers then tossing it behind her where it skittered around noisily on the floor before losing power and turning itself off.

From the wound where her hand used to be, a new one emerged, fingers thicker than his arm impossibly sprouted forth, clean talons like forged Samurai blades.

Inside her, Lupo could hear bones cracking, stretching and reforming. Her face and jaw seemed to bubble beneath the skin, all trace of youthful beauty dissipated.

Lupo had definitely lost his Mojo now. If anything, it shrivelled inwards to his gut. The sight becoming too much for him, Lupo pushed himself to his feet and ran. The thing that was once a little girl didn't even

reach for him, not even an eyelid batted. When he rushed up the stairs and battered on the door, he knew why.

No escape.

He had reinforced this door himself. It could be burning on one side for six hours and it would still hold strong. The only things that would get through the heavy barrier would be a few sticks of dynamite or a chainsaw.

He remembered the grinder at the bottom of the stairs he started to descend in order to retrieve his only means of escape when the Maisie Mae Thing rounded the corner to block his passage.

Her shoulders had broadened in the brief time they were apart, popping off her pink bra with the ongoing strain of new muscle. Her mouth had doubled yet again and every tooth glinted yellow and splinter sharp. Her head seemed too big for her body, the black and pink hair now sporadic across the back of her big head. Her jeans and shoes had ripped away, revealing tree trunk like legs covered in coarse black hair.

She advanced, lurking up the stairs towards the useless drum of his heart-beat.

Lupo cried and fell back against the door; his pitiful legs kicking out like a petulant child. The Maisie Mae thing grabbed at his legs with her thick fingers, pushing them together (he had no choice for her strength was incomparable) and started greedily feeding his feet into her gaping maw. Lupo tried in vain to free himself, screaming louder and louder, hoping by some chance that the neighbours would somehow hear him and save him from this monster.

With an unsatisfying crunch, Lupo watched as the ungodly thing that was once Maisie Mae bit off both his feet.

This time, Lupo shrieked so loud he tore something in his throat. Something warm and slid down into his gullet. He screamed no more.

His feet dropped off and disappeared down into her esophagus. He could manage to utter nothing but a slurping and breathy gasp. He raised a fist, or at least in his mind he did.

The thick dark tongue flicked suggestively over the stumps as she swallowed, drinking him in.

She continued her munching, feeding him in, inch by inch. Each time licking the wound with that dark eel-like tongue so he didn't bleed out. He felt the pain still even though numbness overtook him, paralyzing his fight.

Her consciousness entered him and he saw what she was, what she did for a living.

He was the latest of many and certainly not the last. She had been around longer than he. All of her previous meals passed by in a flash, every face locked into a hideous death throe. He was to join them.

She wasn't born; she was created, put here for a purpose by the old gods. She checked on mankind. Kept the bad ones at bay. An overseer.

She had reached his crotch now and it was here she paused. He looked into her milky yellow eyes and she into his. She was waiting for him to die.

And she would.

She wanted him to feel every last excruciating moment, something in her saliva kept him going, stopped him from bleeding to death yet kept the nerve endings brutally alive and awake, buzzing with agonizing activity.

It took hours.

Then sometime before dawn, his heart gave in and stopped. Maisie continued her feast.

Below him, hell beckoned.

* * *

Once she had regurgitated the chewed bones, hair and anything else she couldn't digest into a bin liner, including the basement key that she easily fished out from the mess, as it was the last thing on the pile. Maisie returned to her unnatural form and stripped off the rags that her clothes had become and washed herself down in the cold water that the Belfast sink provided. She dried off with the towel and changed into a fresh set of clothes that she kept in her back pack, brushed the meaty bits of Mr Lupo from her teeth and combed her hair into her preferred punk rocker Joan Jett style.

Once she felt vaguely human again, Maisie Mae logged onto Lupo's computer and checked his contacts list in the hope of securing herself a fresh meal for the next night.

The moral is: Be wary of strangers/ online predators.

JUST SAY NO

Todd Martin

Tommy sat on the beach by the bonfire and stared out at the ocean. He'd never seen it in person before and was amazed by how beautiful it was. As he continued to look at it he thought that it was even more inspiring at night than it was during the day. He'd always heard about how most sharks hunted at night, and he smiled as he thought about the possibility of a bull, hammerhead, or even a great white swimming around beneath the surface of the dark water searching for its next meal. Even though he had loved sharks and had been fascinated with them his entire life he still had no desire to see one close up. In his mind being eaten alive was probably the worst possible way to go.

"Here man, hit this!" the hippie-looking guy sitting next to him said as he reached over to hand him a joint.

"No thanks," Tommy said politely. He'd never smoked pot and never planned to as he could never get past the smell of it.

"This is the best Cannabis in the world, my friend. It is guaranteed to send you off to the races."

"That's okay, I think I'll pass."

"Fine man, more for me then," the old hippie shrugged, sounding slightly offended before he went back to strumming the acoustic guitar that he'd been playing all night.

Tommy sat there watching some of the other people as they danced, talked, sang along with the radio, smoked dope, and consumed one beer after the other. There were several couples making out right there on the beach in front of God and everyone there were even a few brave souls who had stripped nude and jumped into the ocean for a late night swim (which immediately made the opening scene from "Jaws" run through Tommy's head).

He didn't really know any of the people at the beach party but it didn't bother him. They had all been friendly to him and welcomed him to the party as if they'd known him his entire life. He dreaded the thought of his vacation being over as it meant that he would have to go back to his shitty job at the call center where everyone was rude and unpleasant. At least it would be July 4th in a few weeks and since it fell on a Friday it meant he had a long weekend coming up. It was nice to have something to look forward to, no matter how small it may seem to anyone else.

He glanced over at a group of people laughing loudly and spotted the cute redhead he'd had his eye on all night. She was absolutely stunning and he had never seen a woman as beautiful as she was. He wished that he could

just walk up to her and strike up a conversation with her but he was always nervous around the opposite sex, especially if they were as attractive as the redhead was.

He heard the hippie cough violently after taking a hit off his joint and suddenly a thought crossed his mind. Even though he didn't like drugs he knew that he needed something that would relax him enough that he could just walk up to the redhead and start talking to her. He thought about how talkative his friend Josh (who was normally so painfully shy that he very seldom said a word to anyone) would get after he smoked a joint and he was pretty sure that it would have the same effect on him. He never in a million years thought that he would smoke pot but at the moment he was desperate to talk to the redhead before the night was over and was willing to try anything that might possibly help him come out of his shell.

"Hey, can I have a hit on that?" he heard himself the hippie, not quite sure he had the nerve to go through with it.

"Sure brother, it's the best stuff you'll ever toké." The hippie replied, smiling as he handed the joint to him.

Tommy took it and tried his best to wipe the hippie's slobber off if it before he put it anywhere near his mouth. He placed it between his lips and started toking on it, trying to remember if the company he worked for ever did random drug tests.

He took several drags off of it and was surprised by how much he actually liked it (even though he still didn't care for the way it smelled). He felt very relaxed and happy within just a few minutes and it was then and there that he finally realized after all these years of being anti-marijuana why some people liked smoking it so much. He could really get used to the way that it made him feel and he tried to make a mental note to remind himself to buy some from the hippie to take home with him.

"Go easy, bro!" the hippie said, reaching over to reclaim his joint from Tommy.

"Thank you, I really appreciate it." Tommy answered, handing it back to him with a huge smile on his face and feeling like he was on top of the world.

"No problem, man."

Tommy got up and staggered over to where the redhead was standing with a few other people. He introduced himself to her, surprising himself by how confident he felt and sounded. It was pretty obvious that she liked talking to him as she kept smiling at him and even reached over and touched his arm a few times as they conversed.

Her name was Asia and she looked even better up close than she did from a distance. She was pretty much his dream girl and he couldn't believe that he was actually standing there talking to her without feeling nervous or scared out of his mind.

They talked for a little while and then she suggested that they go for a walk on the beach so they could be alone. Tommy agreed that it was a good idea and when she took him by the hand he thought that his heart might explode in his chest it was pumping so hard due to his excitement and happiness.

They walked on the moonlit beach for a bit laughing and talking until they came to a secluded area with no one else around. Asia gave him a quick kiss on the lips out of nowhere and before he knew it she was busy pulling his clothes off. She stripped down as well and they ended up having sex right there on the beach under the stars. It was like a dream come true for Tommy and when they were done Asia lay her head on his chest and he held her close as he thought about how he had just had the greatest night of his entire life. She was fast asleep and right before he drifted off himself he saw a shooting star pass overhead, making it a perfect night.

When he woke up the next morning he noticed a weird coppery taste in his mouth at once. It took him a moment to realize that it was blood but it didn't really alarm him as he was prone to biting his tongue in his sleep. It wasn't uncommon for him to wake up in the morning tasting blood because he'd bitten his tongue a little too hard while he was sleeping the night before. He couldn't help but notice that he also felt oddly bloated like he'd just eaten a big meal but he thought could just be that his stomach was acting up due to the pot and all the alcohol he'd had. He wasn't too worried about it until he turned over to kiss Asia good morning and what he saw made him scream.

She was laying there on her back beside him staring blankly up at the sky. Her bloody and partially eaten body looked as if some sort of wild animal had ravaged her. There were bite marks all over what was left of her and her throat had been ripped open. Several of her fingers had been bitten off and one of her legs was completely missing.

He could only moan as he wiped away at her dried blood all over his chin. He stood up slowly and had to fight the urge not to pass out as he heard the hippie's voice over and over in his head tell him "This is the best Cannabis in the world, my friend."

He suddenly felt sick so he bent over and proceeded to vomit all over the beach. As he emptied the contents of his stomach he started to remember what he'd done to Asia the night before and he thought about how similar the words cannibal and Cannabis were. He also thought about how his mother always told him to never use drugs when he was younger. He wished that he had listened to her.

The moral is: Mother knows best on what to ingest.

DIARIES OF CEPHALIC DESCENT

Jason Hughes

The stereo was moderately loud and the sunroof was open. The moon beamed a subtle blanket of radiant nocturnal skylight, descending into the car. A dark, winding road stretched ahead... "Did you see the look on Donna's face when you did that under the table?" Manny asked as Crisline started to laugh hysterically.

"Did I? She was right there in front of me when I was doing it to you. I didn't think anyone was watching!" Crisline said as she began to choke on her Bubble gum flavored, *Tidal Wave Soda*. A shot of blue liquid discharged from her nostrils. She snorted as Manny looked over at her and began to laugh and playfully point. "A-ha! Did you see that?! You just shot that shit through your nose!" Manny said with a blissful and slightly slurred chuckle. He had a few drinks as the night had progressed, and memories unfolded between his group of old friends from college. He and Crisline had met in college, through this very group of friends. "That burned my nose and the back of my throat! That was funny," Crisline said as Manny looked over at her without a care in the world. "Almost as funny as earlier tonight. That was fucking..."

"Manny! Look..." A deafening screech, followed by a loud crash of one ton black metal at sixty miles an hour and shattering glass echoed through the night sky. The deafening sound was worse than ten - thousand rusty nails on a chalk board.

Manny Palmer could barely open his rapidly fluttering eyelids. He looked up to the sky as something warm slithered beneath his back, palms and fingers. It was somewhat soothing that flowed with a syrupy sludge - like persistence. Manny could barely move. His eyes circled around the sky, until it slowed down on a particular patch of a single cloud above. His wife of twenty years, Crisline, was lying next to him. Her white dress that she had worn to the Galaxy Diner that night was dyed in a crimson memory. Manny knew what the warm sensation was that he was experiencing. He felt his own blood and life, draining beneath him. "Cris-line. Cris...line?... Cris..." There was no reply. His wife was flailed out on the rocky pavement, still and dead beside him. Her head was half missing. Everything faded to black. Crisliiiiine faded out in his scrambled mind and steadily blackening vision. Soon, all three were gone...

"Mr... Mr. Palmer... Can you hear me?" Manny opened his eyes and looked around. He was in a white room. With a huge, circular light above his head. I must have fucking died in the accident. I can't move. I can barely

hear. Everything is in tunnel vision and audio, he thought to himself... God? "I... I... can't..."

"My name is Doctor Jerald Carlisle. You're at... Mount... Crest - wave... Memorial... Hospital. Can you... tell me... your... full... name." A million names, words, phrases and questions bounced around within Manny's stitched cranium, yet not a single verbal vibration could make its way out of his mouth. Except for one... "Cristine!? Where is Crist..."

"Crisline... It... It was Crisline... Now, can you tell us your name, sir? What ... is ... your... name? What is your first... and last... name?" Doctor Carlisle asked once more in a dragging sentence, as if he were talking to a baby or someone with a low functioning mentality. Manny was possibly and as of now, presumably the latter mentioned. He had no clue as to what was going on around him or right before his very eyes... much less within his own mind. "Manny," he uttered in a cracking, defeated tone. He was unaware of what was happening around him, but he was certain of one thing... It was not good. His condition was, without a doubt, looming at critical status.

Manny thought once more for a split second, that his life and shelled entity had come to a abrupt expiration and sudden departure. Maybe Crisline was still alive. He could have easily been the one that died in the accident. Maybe Crisline was okay. He kept telling himself this repeating scenario over and over again. He began to battle with the hopeful conclusion until the effects of the morphine began to weaken... He soon felt the pain that rushed through his spasming muscles and cracking bones in an agonizingly full effect. I'm alive... Why? I'd be better off dead... Just let me die. Crisline... is... gone, he thought to himself as a tear ran down his cheek. He could hear the machine that was plugged into his veins, courtesy of a large silver needle. It began to pump another dosage of painkilling medicine into his bloodstream. The pain subtly began to fade away once more, but the reality of what had happened was planted and burned into his mind and eyes. He was physically in shambles... and his wife of twenty years had lost her life. Manny had become an emotional, walking wreck in the blink of his love stricken and blinded eyes. He knew that a long, rigorous road to rehabilitation was not far ahead. He dreaded every step of the process. From the time he became aware of his condition, Manny knew that it was not going to be an easy ride ahead. The memory of his past married life and spouse had been left to die on the road behind like decayed roadkill in the scorching Texas sun.

Time crawled by in a crippled limp as Manny participated in recovery sessions on a daily basis. Soon, his feeling came back. He had relearned how to walk and use his arms again. The more his memory recovered, the less he wanted to keep the faded mental images in his mind. The only image scarred into his eyes, was the coal black sky above as it seemed to fall and engulf his vision and final moment with his lost love. He could not recall

how Crisline's voice sounded, or once soothed his soul before. Her voice rested dormant somewhere inside of him. Manny felt as if everything he had known was being reprogrammed little by little and literally step by step. Everything he had loved was now lost forever. He had to regain and grasp his entire way of life once more, and relearn it all. One certainty that came easily, was the understanding that his tribulations would not be a walk in the park. Many obstacles would lie ahead... and they did.

First and foremost, Manny had to find another job and career. He barely remembered the occupation as a Sales Representative for Ikonik Software Enterprises Inc. that he left the day of that dark, life changing and fatally disturbing night. "Work, work, work," Manny repeated to himself on a daily basis for some kind of motivation. Although he was completely mobile, his mouth had to remain wired shut for another two weeks. His jaw had been completely shattered in the accident.

Manny woke up on the first Monday morning after he could walk again with no pain. He had to get out there and find something, anything. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror and looked at himself. "You're never going to get your life back the way it use to be. Look at me. Look what you did to me," Manny's reflection stated as he stood there in a hollow gaze of utter disbelief. He could hear his own voice, but his mouth was still wired shut. "Who's there?" Manny asked in a muffled and painful slur.

"Who do you think I am? I'm you. Look into the sink. You see the razor, don't you?" Manny nodded his head in a silent response. "Good, pick it up... and slice your wrists wide open. Remember to do it up and down, not side to side. You don't want anyone to think this is a cry for help... You... we... want a sure way out. Don't we?" What am I saying to myself? Is this a fucking hallucination? Manny thought to himself as he painfully ground his teeth in nervousness. He looked down into the sink. His eyes shifted from the drain, to the razor and back to his reflection. His reflection had a slight delay in lifting its head. As they returned to eye level, Manny's reflection was smiling back at him. A second faded reflection stood behind Manny's own. It was Crisline, covered in blood. Manny tried to scream, but could not. "Look, Manny. Look what your carelessness did to me. I'm nothing but carved bits of maggot food because of you. I want you here with me," Crisline's ghastly image said as she slowly reached out for Manny's shoulder. He screamed and turned around. He knew it had to be his imagination. This could not possibly be happening. As he jerked his head around, Crisline's image was still there. He could feel the warmth of her blood on the cold bathroom tile as it slithered around his feet. For something so unreal, it felt all too real to Manny. He could smell the stench of decay as it radiated from Crisline's body. Manny closed his eyes and waited for the dreadful feeling to pass over him. "I'm sorry," he cried under his breath. Just as he reopened his eyes, Crisline's cold, stiff fingers draped over his shoulders. He could actually feel each finger's icy, gripping presence.

Manny screamed as loud as he could, almost breaking the wire jaw placement. He lunged out of the bathroom and into the hallway, slamming against the wall. He put his hands over his face and began to cry. As he refocused on the bathroom through his blurred vision, the image of Crisline had vanished along with her blood. Manny gathered himself and his crumbling posture... and reentered the bathroom. He looked down into the sink and glared at the razor once more. Maybe I just need more sleep. All of this is getting to me. I'm delusional, that's all, he thought to himself as he wiped the burning tears from his shattered soul windows.

Manny stumbled into the bedroom and belly flopped onto his king sized bed. This can't be happening to me. It's all a bad dream. I'm going to wake up soon... I have to, he thought to himself as the comfortability of the fluffy pillow beneath his head drove him into dreamland. He knew somehow that it would all be over soon.

Manny was on top of Crisline. He was making love to her in a glorious environment of colorful flowers and beaming sunshine, as far as their site would travel. Everything was perfect. "You know I'll always love you, Crisline... No matter what" Manny said with a smile.

"And I'll always love you, Manny. Always" Crisline replied with a softly delivered kiss. Manny looked into Crisline's eyes and could almost see his reflection in the blazing sun from above. Crisline looked like an angel on Earth and lying right there, beneath Manny. She was splayed open and looking up at him. "Come to me, Manny." Crisline said in the most loving command.

"You light up my life, Crisline. I don't know what I would do without you," Manny replied. He knew everything was too perfect. He knew this moment was all too good to be true... and would all soon come to an end. It had to be a dream.

The sun shined through the blinds in a shadow striped pattern across the bedroom wall. Manny squinted as he opened his eyes. He looked around in a dreary, sluggish daze of morning drowsiness. He looked down at the white sheets which covered his body, and up to the light that was six inches in front of his face. Two eyes of a strange man were standing over him, in a blue cloth covering the bottom part of his face. Other voices were traveling through his ears from all directions. Something was beeping in the background. It sounded the tone and tempo sounded very familiar to Manny. "Where's Christine?" Manny asked as he looked around in a wandering cerebral cluster - fuck.

"It... was... Crisline," the masked man proclaimed... "... And she's right here, next to you. She's trying to speak to you," the Doctor said as he looked to Manny's left. Manny looked over and Crisline was beside him. She was burned from her head to her toes and covered in blood. She was stretched out in the bed next to him. She looked as though she were a corpse... and she was. "Why did you do this to me, Manny? You drank too

much. I told you not to drink and mix you alcohol like you did. Look at me. I'm a mummified shell of a woman because of you. You bastard, it should have fucking been you. Crisline reached out for Manny as he opened his eyes and screamed bloody murder... or vehicular manslaughter.

Manny looked up at the white ceiling that morbidly reminded him of the blood drenched sheet that covered Crisline's body. He witnessed it happen, but was too disoriented to have the ghastly image burned into his mind. His last minutes on earth with his beloved sweetheart of fifteen years were spent in a blind sphere of foggy confusion. He realized that the previous sight of Crisline was nothing more than a lucid nightmare. He rubbed his eyes and looked over where she use to sleep. There she was, lying right next to him in the bed... at arms distance. She was a cut and burned bloody, mangled and charred mess. Her head was missing. Manny looked down and she Crisline's head was between his legs and severed from her decapitated body. "Noooooooo!" Manny screamed as the wiring that bound his mouth shut nearly popped off with his mandible.

"I'm waiting for you, Manny. You've sent me away forever and I want you here with me. Right here... with me... right now," Crisline uttered in a caustically dead delivered tone of whispered vengeance. Manny's eyes watered up as his sight blurred into a salty, underwater view. He squeezed them tightly and wiped the tears and perspiration from his pale white face.

Manny's body went numb and his complexion drained from a tanned skin tint, to a flushed and pasty surface of moistened flesh. His head began to mentally swim and spin into a pool of paranoia as the room rotated around him spinning motion. Delusional waves of claustrophobic dementia washed over his fuzzing perceptual vision of frenzied psychosis. He could feel the churning sickness that nestled in his stomach, as it started to creep its way through his throat and slither into his mouth. The bitterly repulsive taste that assaulted Manny's tongue was a combination of guilt, regret, despair and sorrow. Not only did he take an innocent life, he took his soul mate away from him in the process. He felt as if a part of him had died, and it was all his fault. A swirling sensation of anguished penitence wrapped around his brain and jolted through his bones.

Manny jumped out of bed as he stumbled backwards, into the wall. The stability of not only his body, but his mind as well... was slipping into a blissfully incoherent pattern of suffering for what he had done. He felt as though he had involuntarily murdered half of himself. Manny had committed an unintentional fifty percent suicide in the blink of an eye. He had to live in crumbling shambles, as a deceased memory held his hand in a tightly frozen grip. Haunting visions of his ex wife's mortal coil guided him through flames of scorching torment. Manny could not tell if he was awake, asleep or if he had died in the crash with Crisline, and was being punished in the afterlife for his fatally ill willed decision. He could not differentiate

between the nightmarish dreamland and terrifying reality in which he walked a wobbling tight rope in between.

The room began to spin as the walls closed in on Manny in a wavy motion. He felt trapped in a vividly bad acid trip with no escape and only one path to take. He could feel his head swimming, his eyes spinning and his stomach turning in all directions and at one time. There was a simultaneous swirl of nightmarish emotions throughout his body, soul and mind.

Manny arose from the bedroom floor and made his way into the bathroom. He leaned over the sink and looked into his own eyes as they began to drip blood down his cheeks. "Take your own advise... Kill yourself. Listen to the voice of the loved one you have taken, join her. She is the voice of reason," Manny's reflection said as he looked down into the sink. Manny's head followed his reflection's lead. The razor was glaring up at him as the bathroom light gleamed from its shiny silver beckoning blade. Manny wiped his eyes and looked at his hands. They were clean. He looked back into the mirror. His reflection was still looking down and slowly raised his head back to a leveled position. His eye sockets were empty. Crisline was behind him with her arms around his waist. She was bleeding and burned with a smile on her face. As Manny began to scream a small cut etched across Crisline's neck. Her head detached and rolled off onto the floor behind her. Maggots and other insects began to crawl from within her neck as she stared up at Manny. The crawling species began to scurry from her partially opened mouth as Manny began to gag.

It was as if she was regurgitating the parasites which manifested and devoured her stiff, decomposing corpse. Manny's nose hairs began to burn with a singeing discomfort. It was the smell of alcohol, smoke and blood. It was one - hundred percent proof that he had clearly driven himself down a one way street to a terminally ill destination... of pure nonstop insanity.

The phone rang Manny began to sweat more and more as his quivering legs barely kept his balance long enough to fall to his knees as he was a mere few steps from the phone. Maybe it's mom. She always makes things better an life worth living when I'm down in the dumps, Manny hoped, wished and silently prayed... Please be you, mother, Manny thought to himself as he reached out for the receiver. "Hello?" Manny said in a cracking tone of physical despair.

"Manny... Palmer, I know... what you've done... and so do you," the voice on the other end announced in a coarsely grim murmur. Manny had no foggy clue in Hell who could have been speaking to him. He was uncertain as to how they came across his number. It was unlisted in the phone - book and information. He looked at the caller identification box and saw his own number. He knew he recognized the voice from somewhere. "Who... who is this? Where are you..."

"You know where I'm calling from, Manual... and you know who I am," the voice said.

"No... I...I don't..."

"I was the life that you stole..." the male voice proclaimed as it slowly transformed into that of a female..."By a mistake that you made... Manny" Her voice was one that he would always remember, and would hate to forget. Manny's confusion of talking to a male and female within the same sentence was abundant as he could not say another word. He pieced the confusion together bit by bit. The caller was himself, and the female voice was that of Crisline. Manny was drenched in sweat and began to tremble to the point of dropping the phone. His slipping grip did not help much as well... Not only his grip on the phone, but on his dwindling rationality. He was uncertain of brain damage, as the Doctor did not disclose this detrimental information. Although this was the case, Manny was certain that something was not right upstairs. Signals were crossing and nerves were frayed from this fateful night."Wake up! Wake... up!" he kept screaming within his hollowed dome, yet he could not hear his own voice. Something unknown was blocking all transmission of reason, and clogging his sense of well - being. He looked down at the receiver as if it were a tool of torture. At this juncture in time, it was just that and nothing more... a piece of the puzzle to delusional paranoia. Manny kicked the receiver and began to crawl down the hall. He wanted to wash the slimy filth that seemed to be dripping from his head... somewhere inside of him.

He picked up the phone and called the hospital which nurtured him after his accident. The phone continued to ring... and ring... and ring. Why won't someone answer the phone?! Manny thought to himself in rage. His patience drained like the sands through the hour glass, held in the hand of Father Death. A dial tone began to beep on the phone, like a heart monitor. After thirty seconds of a pulsating beep, it hit a flat - lined dial tone. "There is no escaping what you've done to me. The doctors can't help you. No one can, you brought all of this... and me back... on yourself" Crisline's voice said through the dial tone. Many began to smash the receiver against his forehead and threw it against the wall.

Manny crawled down the hall and into the bathroom. He slammed the door and began to run streams of warm descending water. He got in the tub and began to scrub himself as hard as he could. He wanted anything he could to rid himself of the dirty haunting feeling that had been lingering and lurking around him in the dark and in the daylight. He scrubbed as hard as he could and scrubbed until the water turned ice cold. He began to shiver once more as he stepped out of the shower and grabbed the hanging towel. He dried his face and looked at the human sized white cloth. It was drenched in crimson stain. Manny was covered in and dripping blood. This was a horrid nightmare. "Look at yourself, Manual. Manny. Look at you. Look at yourself, I'm you. You are me, and just look at us... We are fucking

cracking and broken," his reflection said to him as the mirror began to separate down the middle in a creeping jagged crack. Manny followed the stream with his eyes as it slithered into the sink. The razor was lying dead in the center of the sink, glaring up at him. "Do it!" his reflection in the mirror roared in a towering volume of demanding fury and domination.

"Just leave me alone! Leave me the Hell alone!" Manny snarled at his own reflection.

"Look... Look what you did to me," Crisline's voice said from behind him. Manny looked from the sink and into the mirror in a whiplashing, spine breaking jolt of his neck. His pores were oozing blood. Crisline was nowhere in sight. "You used poor judgment. You altered your mind. You distorted your perception and you betrayed my trust in you... You fucking killed me" rang through the air. It was the voice of Crisline.

"You did it... You killed her, Manny" his reflection said as he looked dead into his glassy eyes.

"This isn't happening! None of you are fucking real! Fuck you all! Fuck every one of you!" Manny blasted as he looked around in a defensive state of delirium. Manny's phantasmal recollections of Crisline's violent departure would always haunt him... If he didn't think of something to put himself out of this foreseen and foretold prophetic glimpse of immortal misery. He looked down at the razor blade in the sink. "I can't do this to myself... I... I can't go one like this... any... longer," Manny said aloud to himself. His hopes of finding a new job were becoming visibly hopeless. The love of his life was physically gone, but somehow sticking around and his own reflection was telling him to snuff himself. This did not include all of the blood drenched scenery of self mutilation and punishment. The tension was killing Manny inside and he had to think of some kind of cure or remedy quick. He did not know how much more of this guilt ridden chamber of punishing torture he could withstand. Two swift strokes of the blade, that's all it would take for Manny to end all of his suffering right there on the spot... as he stared into his own two shamefully selfless esteemed eyes. He could tell that he was not happy with himself. He also knew for a hauntingly, bloody fact... that neither was Crisline. A combination of his conscience and her memory would not let his soul, heart or mind rest in peace. Manny looked down into the sink and saw his own crimson life begin to seep from him and into the drain below. He looked up at his reflection, and into its eyes. He did not see himself anymore. This was not the man that Manny was before the accident. This was someone else entirely... someone that could not live with the grief or the brutal truth of what he had done. "Think of what you did to me. Just over a few drinks, Manny. I'm dead now... because of you. Because of your carelessness and poor judgment, look where I am. I will always be here, until the day... you... join me" Crisline's echoing voice announced. Manny crouched down into a ball on the bathroom tile. He was surrounded by horrid lucidities of his haunting past...

and future as he snapped back into the present... He could surely take no more. He jumped up and looked into the mirror for one terminally dazed glance. Manny grabbed the razor blade and began to slice up and down his wrists. His own reflections and Crisline's voice continued to echo and taunt him as he sliced into his arms and body. Blood glistened from the white sink below. Manny began to scream in bloody pain as his jaw wiring snapped into four parts. His stitches popped out of his cheeks as his bottom jaw snapped off and began to dangle and swing below. Manny's jaw literally dropped onto the floor in a wet plop of red.

Her hand came to a stop as it hit the bottom of the table at Brimsteak Bar-BQ. "What was that? Did you feel it?" Donna Cresting asked as she looked at the two in a playful sense of shock.

"Sir... would you like something else to drink. Another Hammer-Bomb?" the waitress asked politely as she moved her eyes around the table with a cheerful smile. Manny looked up at the waitress and over at Donna. He took a few deep exhales and looked over at Crisline. "Nah... I've had enough.. to drink," Manny panted in an obscurely exhausted breath of orgasmic affection and semi – public display. Crisline smiled and look at him, kissing him on the cheek. "I think I'll have a burger and some fries" Manny said to the waitress. His lightening quick revelation of what could've lied ahead quickly changed his mind as he opened his eyes and leaned back in the cushioned chair. Crisline secretively snatched the napkin from the table and wiped her hand off underneath. The burger came and went and Manny sat for a while to let the consumed alcohol wear off and out of his bloodstream. "They have the best burgers here. Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Yeah. It was good seeing you, Donna" Crisline said as she pushed in her chair and walked away. Manny paid for the food and they exited. Their car was parked a little ways through the moonlit parking lot. He got into his car and they took off out of Brimsteak Bar-BQ and down the road.

"Did you see the look on Donna's face when you did that under the table?" Manny asked as Crisline started to laugh hysterically.

"Did I? She was right there in front of me when I was doing it to you. I didn't think anyone was watching!" Crisline said as she began to choke on her Bubble gum flavored, Tidal Wave Soda. A shot of blue liquid discharged from her nostrils. She snorted as Manny looked over at her and began to laugh and playfully point. "A-ha! Did you see that?! You just shot that shit through your nose!" Manny said with a blissful and slightly slurred chuckle. He had a few drinks as the night had progressed, but Manny paced himself and had something to eat. The manual satisfaction that progressed under the table helped relax him enough to stay a little while longer and sober up before driving. "That burned my nose and the back of my throat! That was funny," Crisline said as Manny looked over at her without a care in the world. "Almost as funny as earlier tonight. That was fucking funny."

“Ha! Yeah, that was crazy. I told you I would do it though. Donna didn't even notice. She heard my hand hit the table, but that was about it. See, we got away with it” Crisline said as she laughed. Manny drove by the almost fateful tree that tower on the side of the road. He looked back at it through the rear - view mirror. Something told him that tree could have been the demise of his wellbeing. “What are you looking at?” Crisline asked as the passed the tree that took her life in Manny's mind almost an hour before.

“Oh... It's nothing. I just got... I don't know. It's nothing” Manny said as he drove down the road and into the night. They made it home safe and sound.

The moral is: Think before you drink and drive, as it could come back to haunt you.

POSSESSED BEAUTY

Thadd Presley

Sandra carved her stomach, using a shard from her piggy bank, while her sister sat on the floor beside her, looking into a mirror at long gashes that tore through her plump, fleshy cheeks. Blood ran into her mouth and down her chin. The money found inside the bank was more than ten dollars, but it didn't mean anything to them. They broke the bank to get the ceramic. They wanted to cut themselves.

An "X" was Sandra's goal when she smashed the pink pig, to cut one so deep in her that it would always be there. After she cut the first one in her forehead, she also wanted an "X" on both her breasts. She did it because she wanted to make herself ugly. But she did not cut her face. It was little Ashley who felt the need to cut her face.

"Look at me, Sandie," she cooed as she looked in the mirror at the gashes. "I'm going to cut big round holes all the way through my cheeks." And she did it, without a sound of pain, by pushing the ceramic shard through her flesh and into her mouth. When she smiled, blood poured out between her teeth. Then, seeing her sisters "X," she cut her forehead as well and thought about cutting her throat.

Neither of the girls cried while they cut, they only kept their distance from each other, using their own mirrors, following their own hearts. They were twins by birth but they never allowed themselves to feel like they were a part of the same. They were always so different in every aspect except one: The pain of the world weighed on them, they could feel it in everything they did, and even before they were told they should, they felt pity for those in a less pleasant situation. At least that's how they felt before the abuse began. Before they learned what it meant to hate.

Once it began, they were shut away. They were simply put in the attic when they told their mother what their father had done to them. At first they thought it was for their own protection and they treated their attic room like a stronghold, but one day the attic door was locked. That day it became their prison.

Over time they grew to know only each other. the only other person they saw was the butler who came twice a day. Pain to Sandra was being away from Ashley, that's what hurt her most. And since the men started visiting, she promised her sister she would never leave her.

"Now, when the men come," Sandra told Ashley, "they will see our cut faces and we will be too ugly for what they want." She looked at her sister for her approval and a tear came to her eye. Her beautiful sister sat before her with "X's" on her breasts. The blood pooled in her belly button.

But, this would save them. No one would want them now. The men would stop coming now.

At 6 o'clock, as always, the butler came to the door and unlocked it. He searched the room for the girls when he didn't see them. It was only when they spoke that he realized what he was looking at. The girls were covered with blood. Ashley's face was caked over like a living scab and Sandra sat naked in the corner picking at a bloody mass where her breasts should have been.

The butler dropped the tray and soup splashed across the wooden floor. "My ladies," the butler called, falling to his knees, "what has happened to you has someone hurt you? I will get your mother."

"We did not do this for mother," Sandra answered deftly.

"No, we want to be ugly."

The twins were taken down from their attic. They held hands and walked slowly behind their butler, leaving bloody footprints behind as they went.

Their mother was sitting by the fireplace in the spacious living room when the girls approached her. She was reading a book and she did not want to be disturbed. "What is it Mansfield?"

"It is your daughters, madam. They have hurt themselves."

She was not concerned. She hadn't even noticed that the girls were in the room. "If they need the doctor, simply call him. No need to disturb me. I'm enjoying the new King novel." She looked then, expecting to see Mansfield bowing his head, but instead she saw her bloody daughters. She stood up slowly, removing her glasses, as if seeing her disfigured daughters was just an illusion.

Sandra's shirt stuck to her belly and blood soaked into her pants, and poor Ashley, her beautiful face cut was so badly the blood had soaked her shirt so much it was sticking to her breasts. The cuts in her face were so deep, her cheeks hung from the bone.

Their mother screamed and the butler blew his whistle three times, signaling the house doctor.

"No Mansfield, they can't be seen like this. What about the gossip? What about father, he will surely die of shame." She swooned as if to faint, but held herself up. "No, we mustn't let this get out."

An hour later both girls were back in their rooms. Sandra was on her bed and the cuts had been cleaned by water and cotton. A solution of alcohol and iodine was used as an antiseptic and their wounds were wrapped. The mother had called a doctor from three towns away to do the procedures.

"I don't know why they would have done that," the doctor started. "I'm sure they have everything they need right here in this place. May I ask where the father is?"

"Yes, of course, father is away on business. He shall be home tonight." The mother answered, tears were in her eyes. Mansfield spoke then.

"I think we should let them convalesce in their upstairs rooms, just for familiarities sake. Although, the attic isn't the best place for them, it seems to be their favorite place of the whole house."

"A splendid idea." She smiled. "You are so good with children, doctor, do you work with them often?"

The doctor smiled, took his payment, and left.

The doctor's orders for the girls were to stay in bed and to have no excitement. Mother made sure no one got to them; those were the doctor's orders. But, the butler, who was the only person that cared for the children, went to their rooms every hour. He wanted to make sure they were getting rest.

The twins were to inherit their family's estate; land, stocks and the over-seas accounts which were made when WWI ruined the European economy. They would get it all. He loved the girls and he wanted to see them get well.

The first night went by in a blur for Sandra, the doctor had given her medicine and she slept, but Ashley was awake for most of the night. Her face hurt too bad to sleep. Her lips were swollen and her nose was so stopped up it was hard to breath. She tried to wake up Sandra, but she couldn't talk loud enough. Her cheeks were so badly cut through that she couldn't make words. The words came out sounding hollow and air escaped from odd angles. Finally she slipped from her bed and crawled over to her bed and shook Sandra, but that didn't work either.

She sat down on the floor and felt for the book she'd found two months before; she reached under the mattress, moving aside pieces of ceramic she'd hidden for later and got the black book. She looked at its cover and had a great idea. Picking her scab open, she got the blood flowing and she rubbed it across the book's title: The Necronomicon.

She had read the book twice so far and it taught her the way's of the old world; the way the world was when it was ruled by beings that never died. She enjoyed these simple truths and wanted to know about the old world and the doorways that were guarded by the Elders; she wanted to learn of the ancient races behind the doorways.

The reason she cut her face was right here in the book. She'd rather be ugly than be a whore, she'd rather stay pure than to be an abomination. History was full of people who were ruined by worldly things she wanted to save herself for the world to come and to be known to the Ancient Ones when she arrived. And for that she would suffer.

Her own mother had turned men onto her like she was an animal; and, to those who took her clothes off, they were going to die. She knew that they would answer for their sins; the Ancient Ones would make amends for her. All she had to do was her part.

Ashley's attention went to Sandra's face then. She noticed for the first time that there were no marks on her face. Ashley wondered about this; she knew this wasn't the way it was done. Sandra needed her face marked to, just like Cain, a visible mark needs to be on her.

Ashley placed the book on the bed and felt under the mattress again, taking a sharp shard of ceramic in her hand. Slowly she walked over to her twin sister and cut her forehead open in one long gash. Blood oozed into her sister's eyes.

Sandra didn't open her eyes at first and Ashley thought she might be dead, but suddenly like sound erupting from a volcano Sandra screamed. Ashley quickly jumped on top of her.

"How could you not mark your face for the one who loves us?" Ashley asked, but Sandra didn't understand her and fought back, kicking her legs and toppling her sister onto the floor. "How Sandra?" Ashley asked in her hollow whispering sound, "Don't you love him?"

Sandra was on top of Ashley now; she had her pinned down as she spoke. "I love him plenty. But, are those men dead yet? Are the men who raped you dead?" She didn't wait for an answer. "No!! They are alive and would be here tonight if we hadn't done this." She felt like screaming. She could feel the pain in her stomach. She hated the pain but it was better than being raped. In her mind she could feel the man on top of her; with every breath she could smell him.

"While I was walking in the garden, Ashley, remember, that man who took me into the wine cellar and hurt me? And I told father, but did anything happen to him? No!!" Then she relaxed, finally saying her peace, and looked at Ashley. "And what about father, he touches us too. He lies with you."

Ashley felt her sister's grip relax and she also relaxed. She smiled up at Sandra. "But that's different. Father is kind to us. We are of his flesh and bone. He is us, we are him." Ashley sat up and pointed to the Necronomicon. "It's right there."

"No," Sandra screamed, "that book doesn't say anything like that. Your imagination is getting dangerous. And for a fact, father told you not to read it. It is forbidden. Shouldn't you obey your father, Ashley?"

"But look at me, I'm beautiful now." Ashley laughed but it only came out through her cheeks in puffs. "The doorways are there. I've been trying to find them while you sleep. I've memorized where some of them are, even the Elders are there just as the book said. If we open them we can go to other worlds. We can have more power than anyone in the world."

Sandra pinned her sister down then and felt for the shard that she knew was on the floor. She found it easily. "I don't want powers." She screamed for a moment, holding the sharp edge to her sister's throat. Ashley smiled.

"I want to meet my Master. Do it now."

Sandra plunged the shard into Ashley's neck. Fresh blood spewed onto Sandra's night gown as Ashley's mouth gurgled and spewed.

With Ashley dead, Sandra got up and looked down on her sister's body. She took a moment and fixed her arms across her chest and put her hair straight. Then she cried a bit because her face looked so bad.

Sandra seen that everything had gone too far and there was no going back. She stepped up onto the armchair and tied a stocking around her neck. She pulled on it to try its strength. She had been planning to do this since the man raped her in the wine cellar, but now was finally time to end it all.

Lights flicked across the house's front windows catching the attention of the mother, who was sitting in the living room warming herself by the fireplace. She looked out the window and saw a policeman walking up to the door. White light glared onto the front of the house, filtering through the windows and lighting most of the living room. She dropped her book on the floor, cursing the doctor for not keeping his word.

The moral is: It's double the giggles, double the grins and double the trouble if you're blessed with twins.

L'UOMO COTTO (THE COOKED MAN)

Tammie Painter

Nico hunched over his desk tapping the ballpoint pens clicker against his teeth. He shrugged. Loyal employee or not, it had to be done. Damn shame, he'd miss the way Sam's long blonde ponytail and tight ass swayed in synchrony as she bustled between tables, but she had to be fired. He hated to do it, but he couldn't have her asking questions and with times being what they were, it was the only way he could afford to stock the larders. He poured himself a drink, fingered the dropper bottle and waited for Sam's shift to end.

L'Uomo was Nico's dream, hell, any chef's dream. After years of slogging away for other chefs and owners who thought that because they conjured up a decent cassoulet they could start a restaurant despite never having stepped inside a professional kitchen, Nico finally took the plunge, shouldered the loans and opened L'Uomo.

Hopes and standards were high then. Customers sought sustainable and humane so Nico insisted on dolphin-friendly fish, local produce and free-range meat that met an ethical perfection even the clergy couldn't attain. It's not how he would eat, some of the stuff tasted like old dirt, but the snobs in the affluent metro area dove in with pocketbooks gaping to gobble it up.

After hours, the menu changed to his preferences and local chefs arrived by coveted invitation to graze on oddities and rarities while imbibing Nico's range of Northwest microbrews, wines and absinthe. Portland's top chefs flocked to L'Uomo like seagulls to scraps of bread. What higher mark of achievement could he have asked for?

One item kept them checking their email for his late night soirees: otolan - rare songbirds force fed to twice their healthy size, roasted in a cognac bath and eaten whole. His friends scrambled for an invite whenever this treat decorated L'Uomo's after hours plates; they delighted in biting into the bodies as much as Nico did. There was something almost sexual, orgiastic even, in the combined crunch of the tiny bones and harmonized sounds of pleasure as the juices filled their mouths.

"Ain't these things endangered?"

"Close to it, so enjoy," Nico replied.

"What wouldn't you eat, Nico?"

"Yeah, roasted any baby pandas lately?"

"If I cooked 'em you know you'd like it," Nico wiped his chin. "And if I said it was antibiotic and cruelty-free beef, my customers would pay \$25 for three ounces of it."

"Hell yeah, I'd eat my grandmother if you cooked her. She's still free-range, you know."

"Any of you think you'd ever eat human?"

"Just my girlfriend," a round of crude laughter filled the room and all that remained of the ortolan's magic were satisfied smacks as everyone licked their fingers.

* * *

Eight months. Eight months of success, hit reviews, loyal crowds and even a photo shoot for Cuisine Magazine. L'Uomo was hot. Then the economy flopped. Home sales plummeted, but optimists simply declared it a buyer's market. Problem was no one had money to be a buyer as the financial life of the city slumped, slouched and then dragged itself through the mud. Unemployment hit twelve percent and people stopped coming in droves to L'Uomo. They all claimed they loved the concept of eating organically, locally and ethically, but empty wallets couldn't cough up enough greenbacks to pay for it.

Nico laid off most of his employees, keeping only his most loyal cooks. He even waited his own tables. The pricier cuts of meat vanished from the menu. The satisfying sound and smell of grass fed lamb and pasture-wandering beef fired on the stovetop grill no longer filled L'Uomo's kitchen. His menu now revolved around chicken. Ethically happy chicken, but still, just chicken. His cooks grew bored and surly with their culinary limitations and people were only willing to pay so much for something they could get at the Colonel's.

By Nico's calculations the restaurant had about seven weeks before his loans and cards would be maxed out trying to keep L'Uomo afloat. When the last two, the only two, customers left after lunch service he jabbed a cigarette into his mouth, lit it the second he was out of the building and strayed to the park joking to himself he better pick out a spot to sleep for the eventual day his dream died.

He selected a bench and hunched over his lap dragging on the cigarette and watching the people. So many people. That's the problem, he mused, too many damn people. The number of humans swarming the planet disgusted him. They wouldn't need all this enviro- eco- sustainable crap if there weren't so many human mouths to feed. It's why people were so unhappy; even Nico with only one biology class under his belt knew the more crowded an environment got, the more stressed and depressed its population ended up. And here they were, miserable in an economic crisis, gang kids shooting each other, religious nut jobs killing anyone who didn't

see things their way, diseases rotting people from the inside out. Yet humans kept breeding as if more people wouldn't cause more problems. Nico dropped the cigarette butt and smashed it out with his foot.

"I hope you're planning on throwing that away," a woman snipped. Nico looked up. She had that round on the way to fat look of someone who probably crawled inside an ice cream container every time she got upset. Three children followed her and twins babbled in a stroller. Nico observed the tell tale bulge of another bun in the oven and recalled that last ortolan feast.

"Yeah, that cigarette butts the problem."

He pushed himself up and walked away determined to reinstate meat on L'Uomo's menu and turn his restaurant around. Meat was abundant and cheap if you knew where to look.

The help wanted sign brought in ten hopefuls the first day. The happy, well-connected ones were passed over; they'd get jobs elsewhere more easily than the loners and introverts Nico hired.

To rekindle the new hope of the restaurant Nico renamed it L'Uomo Cotto. Nico personally posted flyers at the houses and condos of his former loyal customers to remind them of L'Uomo's existence. The flyers promised lush meals with free-range meat priced to match the economy. Low prices, almost as low as the chicken. The first night, business was up ten percent from the previous week. By the following week, it was nearly to the highest point he'd reached all those months ago.

People couldn't get enough. They smacked their lips on thin-sliced pancetta; delighted in the indulgence of crispy cracklin's and savored the porcine smell that reminded them of pork chop suppers and Christmas hams. Nico guaranteed his Jewish and Muslim clientele that the meat was not pig, just a common herd animal new to the culinary world.

Butchering the meat himself was hard work, but his training years ago with a seafood prep cook taught him how to cover every inch of a small room he dubbed The Abattoir with plastic tarps to contain all the blood and funnel it into the room's floor drain. Once he separated the meat for the cooks, broke the bones for the stockpot and set aside organs for the more adventurous eaters, Nico rinsed The Abattoir in bleach and water. When the smell of chlorine greeted his cooks in the morning, they knew the larders would be full and looked forward to cooking the meat Nico simply called Long Pig.

One day Sam applied for a wait staff position. She was cute, smart, and sexy in a meek way and Nico couldn't believe she didn't have a boyfriend, girlfriend or any friends at all it seemed.

"I moved here for school and lost myself in books," she said in the interview. "I guess I didn't bother to set aside time to make friends."

"No family, sisters or brothers to keep you company?"

She shook her head no.

"Not even a cousin?"

"My parents died in a train crash on a trip through Europe when I was little. My grandma raised me, but she died last summer. That's why I thought I'd start over somewhere else."

She was perfect. Showed up on time, never talked back, respectful towards the cooks, but when he fired Katy, Sam started asking questions.

"Could you give me her number? We sort of got to be friends and I'd like to keep in touch."

"I can't really give out personal information. If you want me to pass your number to her, I could do that."

When Katy didn't call, Sam started again.

"Why was she fired? She never did anything wrong."

Nico had a few standard responses this question. The cooks used to ask now and then when a waiter stopped showing up. They never pressed too hard though and eventually stopped asking altogether. They knew who commanded the kitchen and, as head chef, Nico's word was law in his restaurant.

"She stole from the customers. Several times. One of the other wait staff noticed."

"I can't believe it."

"People have secrets in this business, Sam."

"But none of the servers seem to stay more than a couple months and whenever I ask your cooks they just say 'so and so was fired last night.' You do a lot of firing."

"It's how this restaurant stays afloat."

"But couldn't you give Katy a reprimand? A warning?"

"You're very defensive of someone who won't even call you."

"I just—She doesn't seem the type."

"Look, Sam, we need to start dinner service. We can talk more about this after work."

Sam's smile burst out from her fresh face. She never had anything to do after work.

"That'd be great."

Nico sat in his office clicking the pen, clicking the pen and staring at the dropper on his desk. Sam had to be fired. She was too smart. She'd figure it out eventually and then—

He always supposed it'd be hard to prove anything, circumstantial evidence sure, but rumor would get around and he'd be sunk on that alone. Nico refused to let his dream die. He'd brought L'Uomo back too strongly for it to collapse because of some college cutie. She had to be fired.

Sam knocked on the door.

"Come in," Nico took a sip of his whiskey to bolster himself. No matter how many times he did this it didn't get any easier.

Sam entered. As she opened the door, Nico could see the lights were out in the kitchen. He indicated the chair opposite his desk. He took another sip of his drink.

"Want one?"

"Sure."

"Ever try absinthe?" Her eyes widened as if he'd just offered her heroin. She shook her head and the ponytail swished back and forth along her neck. "Well, this will be my treat, It's distilled here in Oregon, you know?"

He set up the glass with a slotted spoon balanced across the rim, placed a sugar cube on the spoon's bowl and squeezed a few drops from the dropper onto the cube.

"I saw this in a movie. It looked so exotic."

"It'll change you, that's for sure."

He poured a small amount of water over the cube and the absinthe turned an opalescent green. Sam couldn't take her eyes off of it. With a flick of the spoon, the sugar plunked into the glass.

"Enjoy."

Sam took a tentative sip and smiled. Nico never expected it, but she raised glass and downed the entire contents.

"Another?" he asked.

Before Sam could answer, she slumped forward, her head thudding onto his desk. Nico pressed the intercom on his office phone. Silence. Everyone was gone.

Nico dragged Sam by the feet through the kitchen. He'd set up The Abattoir's plastic that morning. Meat stocks were low and someone was going to have to re-fill the larders. Such a shame it had to be Sam. Nico pulled out The Abattoir's only key. unlocked the door and dragged Sam in, her long blonde ponytail mopping the floor behind her. The knives glistened on the room's metal table ready to do their work. Tomorrow, when the grills fired up, Sam would be on them and the droves of paying customers would be satiated once again at L'Uomo Cotto.

The moral is: We need to control the growth of the human population.

NO MAN LEFT BEHIND

Scott M. Goriscak

I was eating my breakfast in the mess tent when the thunder of bombs detonating north of our camp startled me. I looked in the direction of the explosions and saw plumes of smoke column upward into the sky. Within moments of the bombing our advanced reconnaissance team radioed in. They were observing the village that was our next target to drive out terrorist elements. The initial report stated that the village was under attack. My question was, by whom? The scout reported a group of unfriendlies shelling and launching an assortment of missiles and jet-propelled grenades on the opposite side of the village. Apparently the cruel, self-appointed dictator had sent his troops to instill fear of his wrath among the villagers, to inspire them to take up arms against our advancing forces and to deter them from surrendering and retreating; but his soldiers missed their target and instead of scaring the villagers bombed the village!

The number of reported village casualties grew as the missiles rained over the area. The last few missiles exploded on impact and a haze of red powder spewed into the air. The slow descent of the mysterious residue covered everyone and everything in its path. Chaos defined the townspeople's panicked reaction to the destruction around them. A closer look through the scout's binoculars revealed massive bleeding from the defenseless population's eyes and ears. They ran blindly into one another and into the walls of the buildings. The unknown agent had robbed them of their sight. The next heart-wrenching radio message reported that the affected population were dying in the streets as the red cloud began to settle. Then the wind gave the deadly dust new life as it lifted it into the air!

The scout continued to radio in "Red cloud seems to be spreading in the wind. It's turning in our..." The communication ceased mid sentence! The next message was muffled and incoherent. We could only assume that the team had to suit up and the radioman was trying to speak through his chemical mask. We asked him to repeat his message when what he was attempting to convey became apparent!

The blaring of the camp's chemical alarms warned us of what the radioman was probably attempting to communicate: an impending chemical contamination. I grabbed for my atropine injection from my leg pocket. I popped its cap open and stabbed it hard into the thigh muscle of my right leg. There was no time to run to my tent and dress in my chemical suit as I felt the desert wind blow against my face. I prayed that the airborne agent wouldn't cause a painful death from infected blisters. I watched nervously as the colors of the litmus patches of my uniform reacted confirming that I

had been exposed to a chemical agent. Knowing that death was all around us, I was as mentally prepared as anyone could be. I hoped that if I were going to die it would be quick and painless. I glanced down at my uniform. The strange colors of the litmus patches identified an unfamiliar chemical and puzzled me. Not knowing what I had been exposed to I continued to wait for the expected ill effects of exposure—blistering, burning, airway constriction—but none came. When the alarms went silent signaling the air was safe, the commander gave the order to begin decontamination. One by one each man walked through the tent and was sprayed with a chemical to decontaminate him and his gear.

After an hour of cleansing our equipment and the campgrounds of any harmful trace of the mysterious chemical, the members of the squadron returned to their normal duties preparing for the night's surge into the village ahead.

At approximately 15:00 the ghastly effects of the morning's missile attacks revealed their horrid aftermath. The radio reports resumed from the recon team to the commander.

"Alpha base 1."

"This is alpha base. Over."

"Scout 1 reporting. Family of fallen villagers have come to claim the dead. Wait! Commander! The villagers are attacking!"

"Who are the villagers attacking?"

"The villagers killed by the bombing are getting up and attacking the people that came to help them! They are eating them!" The commander asked him to repeat his last transmission.

"The dead villagers are eating the living! Repeat. The presumed dead villagers are up and walking around! They are eating anything that is alive!"

The commander asked for the scout to repeat his report, thinking that their communication had been distorted in transmission.

The grisly details continued to unfold as the newly resurrected victims fed. The radioman started to cry as he witnessed the emaciated dead devour a group of terrified young school children! After the children were all gone the dead moved on to the elderly. When all human life had been exterminated at the hands of the already dead they turned and looked in the direction of the recon team. The communications officer continued to narrate the gruesome details to base camp as the army walked in their direction.

Communication of the morbid details continued for the next hour and then the radio signal abruptly ended. Our radioman continued to try to re-establish communications with the recon team without success. In a brief moment we heard the signal re-establish and the sounds of gunfire reverberated through the radio before falling silent again. The commander asked for air support from headquarters. Minutes later two A-10 tank killer aircrafts flew over the base toward the recon team's last coordinates. The

commander ordered them to locate and provide support to the team on the ground, then waited patiently for news.

Then the pilot came over the air. "Located your team surrounded by unfriendlies. All deceased! Permission to engage? Over."

Without hesitation the commander gave the order for lethal action. The sound of exploding ordnance was followed by aircraft gun fire. After numerous fly-bys the pilots riddled the landscape with munitions. Confident their mission was complete the pilot radioed in, "Enemy terminated."

The pilot circled while the smoke cleared and then reported, "Negative, enemy is still advancing."

"Advancing where?" the commander barked.

"Advancing in your direction. Over."

The commander paused then spoke into the radio, "Continue with bombing run and target all weaponry."

The pilot replied, "No weapons present."

The commander again unsure of what he had just heard asked the pilot to repeat his message.

"Advancing unfriendlies unarmed. I repeat, unarmed."

The commander asked the pilot how they could defeat a fully armed squadron.

Pilot response, "Overtook by force of numbers."

"Continue assault until you exhaust all munitions. Over," the commander ordered.

"Affirmative." The pilot radioed back.

The commander raised the camp's alert level. Every man was to pick up a rifle and stand a post. The pilots radioed in that their enemy was still approaching and they were forced to return to the airstrip for re-armament and refueling. They would return within the hour as we dug in and readied ourselves for the enemy. The EOD squadron lined the dunes between us and the approaching enemy with Claymore Mines. An explosion from these would obliterate all life for fifty yards. Bomb run after bomb run the fighter jets failed to keep the enemy from reaching our front door.

Darkness had fallen and we all waited to engage the enemy. We knew the jets and their efforts were failing to stop the advancing enemy as their bombs dropped nearer to our camp with each run. The moon was low in the sky illuminating the silhouettes of the enemy as they emerged over the dunes in the distance. Some of the men began to shoot prematurely as their fright prompted them, but the commander halted their assault.

Where are they all coming from? I asked myself. They kept advancing and the pilots were correct--they weren't fighting back! The pilots radioed in that they were out of ammunition and running low on fuel. They broke off their attack and were returning to their air strip, which left us without air support, on our own. I turned to ask the commander for his orders and he

was gone! I looked around and thought I caught a glimpse of him running in the opposite direction of the enemy. He was going AWOL!

His decision to abandon his troops forced me into a leadership position. I was the next highest ranking officer and the men all looked to me for our next move. I found myself burdened with a difficult decision. I ordered them to fire at will. The night was punctuated by the bright arcs of tracer rounds as they raced across the void, striking the darkened enemy as they approached, but without harming effects. Enemy numbers kept growing until there must have been around three hundred.

Where are they all coming from? I asked myself again.

After a half hour we had exhausted our stockpile of ammunition and the enemy kept advancing on us. Now I wrestled with the burden of upholding the rules of engagement created by the Geneva Convention and the United Nations and let my men be slaughtered, or choosing to violate them and save my men. I decided that I had no choice but to ignore the rules and attempt to save our lives. I ordered the men to suit up in their chemical suits and masks. I instructed the tanks and artillery to load their weapons with the WMD munitions we had confiscated from our previous enemy raids. They all looked oddly at my request, but the sight on the oncoming enemy quickly provoked them. I ordered them to fire when ready. The bombs started exploding and I prayed that the poisonous gases we were utilizing in our counterattack would put an end to the madness. We continued firing the shells and mortars until we exhausted even the illegal weaponry. When the gaseous cloud dissipated all that remained were the gaunt silhouettes of the army of the dead advancing over the top of the dunes. I had done the unthinkable to defeat my adversaries, only to fail. All that remained between us and the walking dead were the Claymores! Without hesitation I gave the order to detonate!

The Claymores' exploding force eradicated the landscape along with the oncoming army. We had done it! We had defeated the army! The men cheered as they witnessed the destruction of their foes. Then the smoke cleared and reality revealed to us how short-lived our victory was. Within moments mutilated Claymore victims rained down on us. Many of my men were in various stages of undress from their protective chemical suits when deadly-chemical-laced heads, limbs, and assorted body parts fell from the sky. Men started collapsing from the direct contact with the toxic body parts. But this wasn't the worst revelation. I looked on in wild amazement as the disturbing scene unfolded before me. The dismembered body parts began moving of their own accord! Decapitated heads bounced and rolled toward the troops! Severed fingers and toes landed on or near the men, inchworming and boring their way into various orifices of soldier's bodies, cruelly and slowly killing them. The sight of the arms and legs squirming along the sand in search of other victims distracted me long enough for an infected, severed upper torso to crawl out of the dark shades of the night,

grab hold of my leg, and bite into it! I collapsed to the ground as the pain pulsed from the wound. I attempted to shake the intruder from my leg without success. I drew my firearm, aimed it, and fired my last round! The bullet extracted the left eye from its socket and blew a hole through the back of the skull, but the head remained attached to me. I discarded my gun and tried to pry it off with my bare hands but only managed to tear its nose from its face. I grabbed at its ears and they came off, too. The head tightened its jaws, severing a chunk of muscle from my leg through my pants leg. I didn't understand how something so fragile could be such a formidable adversary. I grasped the handle of my knife and pulled it from its sheath. I slid the serrated blade across the throat of my attacker sawing through it till the head released and fell to the sand before resuming its rolling attack, narrowly missing me as I limped away.

I didn't know what to do. What was left? Not sure I was capable of rational thought with the hideous chaos going on all around me; I came up with the solution: gas! I quickly screamed out to the men to retreat, instructing them to search out fuel and flammables from around the camp. Twenty men set out in search of the fuel; only five of us returned. I ordered the remaining men to douse anything that moved with the flammables and regroup at the rear gate of the camp.

Having completed the assigned task, the men regrouped with me as instructed. I pulled a flare gun from my pack and aimed it at what was left of the base camp. In the darkness of the night the sand looked alive as the wave of fuel-soaked body parts converged upon us. I fired the flare gun igniting the camp into a gigantic fireball! The wildly animated body parts began to cook, suffocating us with the sickly aroma of burning flesh. Flaming body parts crawled or rolled from the fire and died as the life was barbecued from them. After all was done only five of us survived the night of horror. We walked all night until the sunrise greeted us over the horizon. In the morning light I looked back at our camp smoldering in the distance. Ahead of us I could see the outline of a single structure remaining in our previous camp where I hoped to find some supplies from our prior occupation. The further we walked the more my wounded leg throbbed in pain. Our uniforms were so blood-splattered from the night's battle that it camouflaged my wound. When we reached the camp we searched for any supplies that we might have left behind. We were fortunate to discover a backpack of MRE's and a few precious rounds of ammunition. I divided the MREs among us equally. The men were hungry. I thought I was, too, but when I tried to eat I was repulsed by the food. I didn't understand why; I was starving. I kept trying to force myself to eat, but when I finally succeeded to get a mouthful down my stomach refused it and I vomited.

After settling in and ascertaining that the threat we left behind the night before wasn't tracking us, we set up our camp and prepared it for living and defending if need be. We scheduled a rotating sleep shift and

guard shift. At about five o'clock while I was walking guard duty I started to feel odd. I was scratching an itch on my arm when my fingernail peeled away. I looked at the others and I pulled at my thumbnail; it fell away, too! What is going on? I thought. The sensation was surreal, but surprisingly painless. I heard footsteps from behind. The soldier was here to relieve me of my guard duty and I needed some sleep. I don't know why I felt the need to conceal my affliction but I quickly stuffed my hand into my pocket. I walked back to my backpack and unrolled my sleeping tarp and blanket to protect myself from the cold desert night.

It was still dark when I awoke by an irritated itch on the side of my head. I sat up and reached up to scratch my head. Something was very wrong! I stopped scratching and placed my hand flat against it. My ear was missing! I looked down and saw it resting on my blanket. I reached for the other ear. I was relieved that it was still there, but only temporarily—it fell from my head as my fingers touched it. What was happening to me? Then I recalled the hideous head that bit me. I remembered the tenacity of its frail features as I fought with it. It infected me and I was transforming into whatever it had been. I was scared. I lay back down and contemplated what to do next.

I awoke to the rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire! I scrambled to my feet and felt the queer changes in my body as I tried to maintain my balance. I grabbed my helmet in an attempt to conceal my earless head and without checking, in fear that I might dislodge another body part, I stumbled toward the commotion. I made my way around the corner of the building expecting to see the return of the enemy combatants. The unfolding scene was disturbing. The sergeant of our squadron—or what I thought was the sergeant—was sitting, gaunt and pallid, over one of the men. His eyes were gloomy and dead. His infection was stages ahead of mine. He had killed the private on guard duty, and sat above his victim rapaciously slurping and sifting through the bloody innards and organs as he ate. The scene was so unnerving to me knowing that this was my certain demise.

I was so angry at my affliction that I took it out on the walking corpse. I pulled out my pistol and fired at the hideous figure. The bullet struck him in the shoulder. Unfazed, he growled at me and then resumed voraciously devouring his quarry. The other two men, sickened by the sight, followed my example and fired their sidearms until they were empty. Bullets struck the empty-eyed NCO in the chest and the head. The creature paused, his eyes rolled back in his head as he began to sway back and forth before falling dead over his victim. Or so we hoped. We pulled the atrocity from our fallen comrade. How could this have happened? Two good men, lost.

I began to feel queasy, and I wasn't the only one. I watched as one of the other men became ill emptying the contents of his stomach into the sand. I told them that I would be right back; I needed to get some fresh air. I walked back around the building, then without warning a mask of

uncertainty came over my thoughts. The feeling was followed by increased fatigue and loss of memory. I struggled to control my thoughts and actions until I no longer cared. I could hear senseless utterances coming from my mouth until I lost the ability to speak. All that remained was predatory hunger. I needed to eat. Now! I felt myself walking toward the men, as if I were a marionette under someone else's control. I needed food! I emerged from the cover of the building to find only one of the men present. His back was turned to me as he dug a hole to bury the dead. He heard me coming and said something to me, but I could no longer understand his words. With no response from me he turned to face me and I plunged my knife into his chest. He looked at me with a horrible mask of disbelief as his knees buckled and he silently fell to the ground before me. I could feel my cravings heighten as I smelled the blood from his wound. I bit into his face and tore away a mouthful of flesh with my teeth. I chewed the rubbery mass before swallowing hard. I continued to gnaw, sometimes swallowing without chewing. I fed until I was satisfied, rendering my victim faceless. The other two men returned to find me as I was finishing my meal. Horror gripped their faces as they looked down at me. They drew their weapons and fired. The only sound that could be heard was the click of their empty guns. They both ran away knowing they were defenseless against me without their weapons.

I pursued them, helpless to control my own actions. This inner craving drove my decaying shell to hunt and feed. I took in the dry desert air in search of the soldier's scent. The swirling desert wind camouflaged their location. I walked around the building and saw one of the men in the distance as he fled the scene. I entered the bombed-out ruins of the building in pursuit of my next meal. Then the faint sound of muffled voices caught my attention through the rushing silence of the building. I reached the radioman just as he was relaying his co-ordinates for an air strike. The voice on the radio confirmed the information and the order. He looked up just as I walked around the debris that had concealed him. He yanked the wire and the mic from the transmitter to protect his orders from being rescinded.

I bent down and grabbed a large stone and raised it over my head. In response he could do nothing but scream. I slammed the stone down into his head. I rendered him unconscious with the first blow. The blood spilled down over his face but I was unsatisfied. I wanted more; I wanted to eat. I continued striking the brick into his skull until my meal was ready for consumption. I dropped the bloodied rock and sat down next to my victim. I grabbed his head and pulled at the fragments of his skull that covered the brain. Piece by piece I peeled them away till I exposed the soft gray tissue hiding below. When I was finished prepping my meal I started to eat using his skull as a bowl pulling and scooping the gray matter from it as I gorged myself on the warm, spongy meal. I stuffed the pieces of his brain into my mouth by the handfuls. When my bowl was empty I stood up and

abandoned his corpse in search of my next meal. I searched for the man who had fled from the base earlier. I had trouble locating him but I caught his scent in the distance. I turned and walked in his direction. I walked only a few feet when the roar of an engine startled me. I looked up and saw the approaching aircraft followed by a parachute blooming open as it fell through the air. The object dangling in the air below the parachute was the FOH-1 explosive. The initials stood for "Fires of Hell." On impact everything within a mile would be sucked into Ground Zero and incinerated. I watched knowing I couldn't do a damned thing about it in this body. I continued in my mindless journey in search of food, aware of the impending doom descending upon me.

I underestimated the destructive capability of the explosive. The force of the blast as it impacted was far worse than I could have imagined. The force of the bomb violently tossed me to the ground. A moment later grabbed me and pulled me to the center of the fiery blast that imploded the area. As I flew through the air I saw everything around me destroyed by the explosion. When I reached the fire I saw its flaming fingers dancing across my body but felt nothing as the fire broiled my skin and muscle from my bones and paralyzed me.

Sometime later I lay motionless, smoldering on the dessert sand, as the soldier who escaped my grasp returned with a squadron of men. He looked down at my charred remains and saluted. The only part of me that still functioned was the part that wanted to eat him. He raised his sidearm and fired the weapon into my head! I felt the bullet punch its way through my forehead then ricochet off the interior of my skull before lodging itself in my brain. The bullet stopped, but it continued to sizzle in its resting place. I waited eagerly for death, but it never came. His bullet had failed to extinguish my consciousness. My body was dead to the world, but my blood-craving brain, alive within the walls of my skull for eternity watched as the lid of the coffin clicked in place entombing me forever in the cold darkness. I screamed for help but all fell silent on the ears of my grieving friends and family. I was the only audience to my pleas as they echoed within the confines of my mind.

The moral is: No man gets left behind

1,000,000

Nick Bryan

Liam was trapped in the VIP box. It wasn't as pleasant as it sounded.

He tugged the door, desperation growing with each grunt, but it was wedged. The key turned freely back and forth, but even with the bolt retracted, nothing moved. It opened inwards, so kicking was fruitless, but out of sheer frustration, he tried anyway.

His office shoes, chosen for their shine rather than resilience during kicks, scuffed too easily. They also left his feet vulnerable to bruising and stubbing.

Swearing loudly, he looked around. Unfortunately, it being a box, there was precious little he could do. There was a mini-fridge, some tables and enormous glass windows on all but the back wall, to make sure the most important guests had the most amazing view.

And what a view it was. The stadium swept out and around, but it was late at night and the flood lights were off. Without the huge mini-suns, it was hard to get any sense of what lay so far beneath him, but he could see the sides, the seating rows, arcing all the way to the far end. He didn't need people in the seats to know that it was a massive structure.

After all, he had organised more events here than almost anyone else. He could recite the capacity numbers off by heart. Even when it was only an expanse of blackness in his vision, there was something homely about it. Usually.

But it was cold with no heating, and lest he forget, the door was being held shut by some invisible force. He reached back and gave it another irritable tug. Out of curiosity, he let his hand drift left and flicked the light switch as well. The electric circles in the ceiling kept glowing, no matter which way the button faced.

He had to admit, he liked the place a lot more when he had control over it.

"Mr Hame?"

That was Liam's name. He turned from the light switch and saw that a man was now sitting at the tables in the middle. They still had lovely tablecloths and carefully set cutlery, ready for the next Very Important Visitor.

"Mr Hame, sir?"

The newcomer waved a hand up at him. "I don't mean to sound rude, sir, I truly don't, but you appear to be having trouble concentrating on my face."

Liam had not noticed until then. He was looking right in the man's

direction, but couldn't give you an idea of his features. It was clear that he had hair, but who knows what colour it might be.

"I find it terribly rude, but nonetheless," the man stood up, whilst wearing a white suit, Liam noticed at last, "it's important we have a word now."

He gestured widely at the dozens of places set around him. "Would you care to take a seat?"

And this, Liam thought, was pretty bloody rich. He was the official presence here; who was this man, exactly, to offer him a seat at his own table?

* * *

Six o'clock on a Saturday, two nights before Liam's big day, and his new VIP box was still not ready. He wasn't a cruel man; he didn't kick puppies and rarely swore at babies, it was only in a crisis that he made his subordinates work on the weekend.

But this, unfortunately, punched all the buttons. He had promised that box to some proper VIPs, and that meant he had to deliver. He couldn't have the important people, in important clubs where they congregated, spreading nasty rumours about him.

Because in event management, reputation was everything. If people thought you were a confused mess, the odds are they didn't want you to throw their party. You could get away with being an endearing shambles in some lines of work, but not his.

"Will," he barked into his mobile as he trotted down the stairs, "any word from the electricians yet? Anything at all?"

His harried office junior was forced to relay that there was not, in fact, any word from the electricians. Not even stopgap words such as "We're running a little late" or "My brother has the plague". This lack of communication made him paranoid.

He leapt off the stalls, onto the field. The sheer scale of these venues was still amazing from here. They had U2 playing on Monday; tickets sold out in seconds despite their ludicrous prices. He could fit thousands of people in here, more than you'd even think to look at it.

He looked skyward and saw his new VIP box, mocking him with its incompleteness. He could rewire a plug himself, for christ's sake. He was close to attempting to set up his own lighting. But he knew that insurance made that unwise.

He wasn't even sure why he was the one chasing everyone about this. It wasn't his job, but no-one else seemed to give a damn. His in-name-only superiors seemed incapable of understanding that if the launch was shoddy, no-one would want to use the box even when they had perfected it.

But he knew that despite his dire warnings, he would be blamed if the first guests arrived, there was visible wiring and broken plasterboard throughout, and no-one ever booked again.

Well, he sighed, they could always bang out a few more plebian tickets if push came to shove. No-one would notice a couple more hundred in here, and it would prop up the returns.

In fact, he thought, that wasn't the worst idea he'd ever heard. He pulled out his mobile and instructed Will to put it on standby.

* * *

This man was not a normal man, Liam was coming to realise. His suit was so white that he must have been constantly bleaching it in motion to keep that shade. The face still defied focus.

Liam wasn't an aggressive non-believer in the supernatural; he had never seen any reason to take a position either way. It seemed unlikely that vampires existed, but if he found one of them brunching on his hamster, it wouldn't shatter his entire belief system. Just, you know, a bit of a shock.

Not that he thought this chap was a vampire. Not that he had any opinion yet, in all honesty. Just seemed rather out of the ordinary.

He'd sat down now, at one of the cheap tables. The cloth, plates and cutlery piled on top were all so expensive that it didn't matter so much if the furniture was at the cheap-but-sturdy end of the budget. One of his old tricks.

"I'm so terribly sorry to drop in like this, Mr Hame," the man in white was still talking, "I know you're busy."

Truth be told, Liam wasn't *that* swamped. It was Sunday, he'd got most of the work on this box finished by sheer yelling; all was ready for tomorrow's big gig. But he didn't say that.

"Yeah, I am quite hectic as it goes," his voice didn't quiver, which impressed him, "so can you tell me what's going on?"

"Oh dear, well," and he did seem apologetic, "I'm afraid this will seem a small thing to you."

This was going to be some petty complaint? Even through his curiosity, Liam covered a yawn and fingered the cutlery. He hated to ruin his own table placements, but at least he'd have something to play with if boredom really began to set in

"Do you remember a small gig at The Crossed Arms in Hackney? The Night Terrors were playing? Is this ringing any bells?"

Oh, Liam thought. This was unfortunate. The chap might have a legitimate grievance.

* * *

It was a promoter's dream. Well, it wasn't quite The Who rocking up and announcing they wanted to play his silly pub band night, but it was as near as Liam was going to get any time soon.

A few months in advance, he'd booked the bands for this month's Wild Fire night. He usually counted himself lucky if one of the acts went big afterwards, so he could try and claim some part in their success.

But this time was different. The headline act, the Night Terrors, had become one of those MySpace sensations you sometimes read about. Whilst gigging around London, one of their songs suddenly got spread across the internet.

People were calling them "the new Arctic Monkeys", and although Liam hated the Arctic Monkeys, he'd take the quote. Truth be told, he wasn't a huge fan of the Night Terrors either, but the public seemed to respond to them in some visceral way. It probably boiled down to the fact that people are ultimately quite stupid.

So Liam sipped his drink and waited for the band to come on. He hoped they wouldn't disappoint, especially as the online buzz had tempted a few music journalists to come down. The name of his night would be in the NME, people might start to talk about it as a place to spot promising new talent, and he would finally escape the shitty pub band scene and do something he actually cared about.

Who said Liam Hame wasn't a positive chap?

The pub was heaving. Even Liam, with his lofty promoter status, had a rather limited view, but at least he'd secured a stool, not to mention a spot on the bar.

"Hey," he nodded to the barman, "Will, another pint, cheers?"

Despite the other customers queuing ahead of him, Will the barman nodded and returned with the drink within minutes, barely breaking his rhythm of serving others at the same time. That one was good, Liam noted. Worth keeping an eye on.

As he turned around with his newfound pint, the nervous boy from the ticket table up front shoved over. He maintained little dignity as he elbowed through the masses to reach Liam, feet sticking to the floor with every step; thank god Liam had a stool to keep him clear of it.

"Hey, um, Liam," the boy finally began, a little out of breath from getting this far. Liam felt a slight twinge of guilt that he had no idea what his name might be.

"What's up?" Tactical sip of pint instead of addressing by name.

"Um, we're nearly sold out on the door."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Like, a handful left. Probably be gone by the time I make it back there."

"Right." Liam tapped his foot. "How many people queued up outside?"

"Still at least a hundred? Maybe more."

This was exciting territory to Liam, make no mistake. He'd sold out before, but never had the hordes at the door still. He glanced around the pub, taking note of spare standing room around the stage and at the back. The fire exits were, technically, almost clear.

Thoughtfully, he turned back to the kid. "Can you let a few more in? Seems a shame to disappoint, y'know?"

"Well, I don't know what Al will say about..."

"I'll sort it with Al," and he knew his face looked convincing, "just slot in another twenty or thirty kids, a special treat. I'll get the band to sign you some shit after."

It worked. The kid smiled and ran away. Liam figured the merchandise offer would work; he'd have to get him towards the front for the show too. It was the least Liam could do, since he had no plans whatsoever to square it with Al, and the kid could well end up getting fired.

Not that Liam gave a damn about the money. The cash from thirty extra tickets, by the time it had been split between everyone, would be nothing to him. But the more crammed it was, the better, he thought. Think of the numbers the journos would quote, not to mention what they'd say about the "atmosphere".

* * *

"Going to have to rush you, Mr Hame." The man in white leaned forward, putting both his elbows on the table. Hardly fitting behaviour for Liam's new VIP box. "It looks like you might be remembering something."

And he was. But, not wanting to commit, Liam just nodded and muttered, "Yeah..."

Because it would be hard to pretend he hadn't been there then. After all, a couple of kids had been crushed to death. It wasn't a high point of his career.

"That's good to hear, Mr Hame. But I worry you might not have learned from it."

"Learned what?"

"We, the people," the man in white gestured at himself, which only reminded Liam that he still couldn't discern any of his features, "feel you do not recognise us as individuals, I'm afraid. That your work has left you viewing us only as numbers."

"Bullshit," Liam growled, "I know everyone at my shows is a person, I just..."

He trailed off when the ghostly man glanced towards the light switch. Quite how Liam could tell which way he was looking, since his face was still blurred, was unclear. Suddenly, the lights flickered to death. With no sun outside, the whole VIP box was plunged into pitch blackness.

This guy appeared to have a lot of influence with electronics. Perhaps it was the electrician who had ignored his calls all weekend, punishing Liam for daring to interrupt his family time.

At long last, the light returned, and finally it became clear that this man was not his electrician. His face finally snapped into clarity.

"It's... hang on..." And, after all these years, Liam still couldn't remember. "Nervous kid?"

The man in white chuckled. "It's delightful to find you still remember me, Mr Hame."

"But older? Didn't you..."

He was unwilling to finish the sentence, but the other man was more than happy. "Die at the Night Terrors gig? Yes. Which was fortunate for you, as I was the only one who knew you'd let all those extra people in."

That was exactly what Liam had thought when he'd realised the nervous kid was dead, but he was not proud of it.

"Look, I'm sorry, alright," he sighed, "I know it was shitty, but I was just trying to..."

"I brought it on myself in many ways, I don't entirely blame you." The man in white gave a pleasant smile and sighed. "Everyone makes these overzealous decisions when they're young; the trick is to learn from them."

'Well, I mean, obviously it was awful,' Liam nodded enthusiastically, sensing an escape opportunity, "obviously I always try to make sure nothing like that ever... you know."

He lost his thread a little, distracted by the continued piercing stare of the ghost. "It's good of you to say, Mr Hame, but I'm not sure I entirely believe you. Look out there now, please."

And Liam turned his eyes towards the window of the box. Out there, as before, was a swirling bowl of darkness, encased in looming stadium stalls. As he peered, Liam noticed some kind of movement on the grass. He didn't think there should be any security guards out there. He was about to turn to the ghost and ask what was going on, when the massive video screens at the opposite end of the stadium burst into life.

Fortunately, since he was in the VIP box, Liam had the best view in the house.

* * *

Earlier that evening, as the sun set gloriously behind the stadium, Liam was seized by a glowing sense of personal achievement. After all, who else out there among the anonymous masses could say they had built a VIP viewing area in a major stadium?

He was pretty sure it wasn't many. The wiring was hidden, the walls were whole, even the cutlery was polished. He'd probably annoyed a lot of

people; many of his favourite contractors had found themselves stirred from their beds at an hour that they disliked.

And his mood, at times, had been erratic. Poor Will was probably wishing he could go back to working in a pub, where his biggest concern had been getting punched by a drunk.

Still, Liam thought, it had been worth it in the end. The U2 gig would go ahead tomorrow, the crowd would go wild and his corporate sponsors would have the best seats in the house. It was a shame he hadn't managed to install the in-box bar in time, but the catering staff would just have to run faster.

With a song in his heart, Liam dropped the door shut behind him and jaunted his way down the corridor. Even the way into his new box was beautifully clean, that's how well he'd done. At one point, he had even picked up the vacuum cleaner himself, because if he was going to harry other people, it seemed rude not to muck in.

So aglow was he, a smile opened up across his face when he saw Will at a trestle table in the foyer, sorting a box of guest passes into alphabetical order.

"Hey, Will," Liam bounded over, "surely that can wait?"

"Oh, hi Liam," Will nodded, still concentrating on his table, "just thought I'd get it done, it was bothering me."

Good lad, Liam thought. He'd been lucky with this one. "Just go home, Will. Not much left to do now, and you really should be starting to delegate the menial stuff."

When Will didn't leap up from his table immediately, Liam pointed emphatically to the sliding doors. "*Now*, please. Move it."

Smiling sheepishly, Will leapt up from his table, pulling a rucksack up from next to him. He'd garbled a quick goodnight to his boss and was almost out, when he turned back and called out.

Liam, already moving away in another direction, turned around with a start. "Will? What is it?"

"Um, you were talking about releasing two hundred more regular tickets if we didn't finish the box? I guess we don't need to, now that we've done it?"

For a second, Liam paused. He knew the demand existed, he kept abreast of the brisk eBay trade. Some of those were going for a small fortune. On the other hand, he was confident that he'd got the VIP box up to scratch, so they'd have that money coming in for sure.

So it wasn't necessary, was it? They were pushing up against the capacity figures as it was, he didn't want to get shit from the insurance company. Still, the revenue would be useful. He'd had to call in a few favours to get the box done at the last minute.

Finally, he sighed and compromised.

"Just shove a hundred out, Will. First thing tomorrow morning, say we had some kind of big cancellation."

"Sure thing. See you tomorrow. Big day!"

"G'night, Will."

With a final wave, Will finally left. Liam paused in the foyer for a second, feeling in his pockets for his phone. He was surprised to find it gone, considering he had spent much of the day attached to it. Perhaps it was good for them to have some time apart.

Muttering his annoyance, Liam leapt up the stairs, back around the still-spotless corridors with his eyes fixed on the floor. Thanks to his careful cleaning, a stray mobile phone would stick out like a sore thumb. It was annoying that he'd sent Will away; he could've got the kid to call his phone so he could find it.

There was still no sign when he reached the door to the VIP box. He flipped the door open quickly, and was surprised to find the night had become pitch black in the time he'd been gone. He hit the light switch, and was relieved to see his phone in plain sight on a table.

It was unsettling that he had no recollection of leaving it there, though.

He'd got as far as picking his mobile up and checking for missed calls when the door slammed again with worrying force. There was no breeze in that room.

* * *

When the screens came on, Liam spotted something writhing on the seats, not to mention on the grass. But once again, his vision was blurred whenever he tried to focus tightly.

The image itself, normally some carefully designed graphic, was a lot starker today. On a white background, both screens displayed nothing but "**1,000,000**". Each number was taller than a human being.

The more he stared into the darkness at the centre of the stadium, the more convinced he was that there was a living, breathing mass in there. And who knows what it might be? After all, he was having a conversation with a dead guy, so why couldn't there be some awful gigantic hell-beast squatting at the centre of the stadium?

After all, sending an enormous devil-squid to ruin his venue before his big day would surely fit whatever idea of karmic revenge that the nervous no-longer-kid was trying to carry out?

"So, Mr Hame, this number may not mean a lot to you, I appreciate."

"What are you talking about?" Liam glanced sideways. "It's bigger than anything I've ever put on, of course it does."

The number on both screens checked down to "**999,999**".

"I stand corrected, but that is not what I meant. Unfortunately, we've left it a little late to give you the full effect, but this is what a million looks like."

The floodlights all around the stadium exploded into life. Liam was so used to electrical systems working unbidden that he barely even gave it any thought. Besides, what they illuminated rather distracted him from the phantom switch-flicker.

The entire stadium was full with people. Even as he took in the sheer scope of their packing into the space, the count checked down to "999,997", two in a single click. He could see limbs sliding over each other, people trying to climb over each other to get out. This was beyond *crowded*, it was as if the entire stadium had been loaded up with a shovel.

"And I assure you," the ghost added, as if reading Liam's mind, 'these are real people, snatched straight from their homes. This isn't some trick of the light."

Suddenly, a panic started at the far end and it spread through the entire mass like ripples. A small man fell beneath a large woman and screamed; a couple of kids crunched as they were shoved sideways. "999,991".

Perhaps because it seemed obvious, the man in white didn't bother explaining what the countdown meant, merely watched Liam's reaction. And Liam felt the stare rake into him, but couldn't tear his eyes away from the spectacle. The people were spread from the centre to the sides, some were attempting to climb up the stalls to escape, but their sheer mass was turning it into a small riot.

A man in a polo shirt bounced down several rows of chairs, splitting his head open as he hit the floor. The counter was down to "999,988". Liam got the feeling that they'd find the doors locked even if they managed to reach them.

Finally, he met the eyes of the ghost. "So what now?"

"Well, Mr Hame, I considered forcing you to memorise all their names, but running a million names across the screen would take too long. So I believe I've come up with an alternative."

"What's that, then?" Liam looked back out at the sprawling mass of limbs in the middle of the stadium. He wondered what state the dead bodies under there were in; surely they'd have been stomped to a pulp by now?

"Well,' the man in white nodded, 'I'm going to open one door and let them rush for it, you see. I feel that will stir it up a bit."

True to his word, a small fire exit at the far end sprang open. The light was blasting through it, like a gateway to heaven. Liam wasn't even sure how this was being done, as the cheap neon lighting in that corridor was never that powerful.

A ripple ran through the pile of people in the centre of the field, as they saw the light and reached out for it as one, like a flower on a nature

documentary. Liam thought he could hear a pulping, squealing sound from here, as the numbers on the screens plummeted towards “999,700”.

His tormenter seemed quite unaffected by the carnage below, still. It didn’t appear he’d taken heed of his own great lesson about people not being numbers.

Instead, the dead nervous kid continued. “Now, you can stop this whenever you please, Mr Hame. You just need to answer one simple question, and I’ll let the ones who aren’t yet dead go back where they came from. But be quick, the count is sinking.”

And it was. Parts of the grass were redder than they were green, and the rush for the exit had got the counter below “999,500” at an amazing speed.

Pause for effect.

“What’s my name?”

Shit.

The moral is: Huge numbers of people are more than just numbers

ASHER'S ENNUI

George Wilhite

Asher Moore walked outside the morning after the incident.

His parents would never see him again.

All communications were down so there were still no clear answers regarding the arrival of the alien machinery the previous night. The last image the Moore household witnessed on television before all went black was the footage shown over and over of the mysterious metallic cylinders falling from the sky.

There was no mother ship, or any kind of vessel for that matter, visible via microscopes, lenses, or satellites, so the origin of the cylinders was also unknown.

The Moores did hear about an hour of news on the radio before that media source went dead as well. First-hand accounts of the opening of some of the cylinders. Nothing was alive inside according to these news flashes. They merely discharged either a noxious gas within a pale green mist, or a thick green gelatinous ooze.

That was all they knew.

Greg Moore tried to convince his family to stay inside. They had seen other people and some animals walking outside apparently unharmed by the cylinders' emissions.

"Maybe the gas takes a while to harm us," he pleaded with his wife, Rhonda.

His fifteen year old son Asher responded. "Come on, Dad. It's not like this house is hermetically sealed or anything. If that gas is toxic, it's in here too."

"He has a point, Greg," Rhonda said.

"Rhonda, what if you go out there and everyone wigs out or something? I forbid it."

The Moores were an old-fashioned family, the kind of household dynamic in which if their male leader forbade something, well, that was the end of the discussion. Or at least his wife and son made sure their actions led him to believe that was the case.

The next few hours passed in incredible boredom.

Rhonda thumbed through magazines and Greg paced the length of the house mumbling incoherent theories of what action should be taken. Asher sat and stewed with nervous energy. Without cable television, his Wii, or a working DVD player, he had no options left. He was a child of the Twenty First Century—all his stimulation came from electronic devices. Gadgets run by batteries did not work either this morning. So, no Ipod, no

Kindle either. Whatever else these aliens were up to, they had taken communications back more than a hundred years.

This profound ennui led Asher to disobey orders and sneak out as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Mom was in the bathroom and Dad was fiddling with the radio in one of the bedrooms, so Asher was gone.

Nobody was around as he walked down the street to his best friend Jack's house. He wondered if Jack and his family were okay. Jack would certainly agree to venture out into the world after the incident to investigate. He was no doubt as hopelessly bored inside his house as Asher had been.

The first thing Asher noticed upon reaching Jack's house was the front door was open. This was a decent neighborhood but nobody was comfortable enough with its security to leave their door open. Peering inside as he slowly approached, he could see the place was ruined. Furniture was strewn about and debris littered the floors.

This does not look good at all, he thought as he reached the doorway.

Pale green mist wisped through the living room. Asher retched at the stench of the gas the mist carried. *Like sulfur mixed with piss*, he gagged. In the middle of the floor was a gaping pit, covering the expanse of the living room, kitchen and dining room. The hole looked like it was formed from beneath the house and then built upwards. It had ripped through walls and furniture in its path with little effort.

Ten large tentacles slithered out from the pit as though searching for prey. Asher gasped as he took a few steps forward to look down inside the pit. "Jack?" He called out. "Mister and Missis Fenster?" There was no human response, but his voice increased the intensity of movement among the tentacles.

"Shit!" Asher was unsure whether to look further for his friend or just *get the Hell out of there*.

He did not have a second longer to ponder that decision. One of the tentacles wrapped around him and drew him down into the pit with incredible speed.

Thoughts raced through his mind. How could this thing have formed from gas and that disgusting gelatin over night? Or did this monster descend on the world after the cylinders? When the world was dark and silent. Pain racked his body as the tentacle squeezed with tremendous power. Beneath the floor he saw an endless mass of slimy flesh and more of the gelatin which carried the same rancid odor as the mist above. The tentacle thrust Asher into a small opening in the body of the creature. He was stuffed in so tightly he became one with the monster.

Asher cried out to his family and Jack's in vain. No answer at all.

At least my death will be quick down here. Who knows what's in store up above now.

But Asher would soon learn the *naïveté* of that assertion.

Centuries passed in the belly of the beast as it stretched out and grew, adding many more humans and fellow creatures to its hideous construction.

Asher would feel his life draining out, certain his death was imminent, and then feel inexplicably re-energized through some osmosis from the alien flesh surrounding him. This process continued without end.

It's like I'm a rechargeable battery. An energy source for this vile thing.

Pain came in waves as did the constant torture of the extraordinary cycle of exhaustion and rejuvenation. Apparently this was his eternity now, to meld with this beast. His flesh was slowly dissolving and being replaced by a skin more like that of his captor. *How long will it be before I am not even recognizable as "human"?*

Though he never saw his family or Jack again, many humans were stuck into this festering Hell around him. They cried for their loved ones but this monster did not seem to know pity or remorse.

It merely used them to survive.

The moral is: Parents know best

SKIN DEEP

Stephen W. Roberts

Oh, what the Hell did I get myself into, James stared at his drink. Sweat beads formed on his forehead and upper lip coinciding with being in a crowded club and the overwhelming feeling of not belonging. James stirred his drink with a straw and wished he were somewhere, anywhere else but here in this club tonight.

"Hey buddy, can I get you anything else?" The muscular, tattooed bartender asked.

"No thanks, I'm good." James said, fidgeting with his straw.

The bartender smiled at James and calmly served drinks to the person crowded next to him, from which he took the hint, nodded graciously and moved away from the bar.

He sipped his gin and tonic, silently complaining of its taste and cost, not sure of which was worse. He found himself a dimly lit corner in the club that wasn't currently inhabited with drunken, grinding college kids and settled into a booth.

The strobe lights and loud music was far from James' scene. He was basically the same age as most of the college kids dancing on the floor, but he was never one to fit in with his generation. James actually found himself longing for the safety of the online dating he'd made a life of. The anonymity made it easier to be witty and charming. It made it easier to lie.

James took off his thick rimmed glasses and wiped them on his polo shirt. The lights were bothering his eyes and with that, it was settled. James would finish his drink and be on his way. He smiled, for he already felt more in control of his situation.

James stood, turned up his glass with a quick swig and slammed it back down to the table. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and turned to leave, stumbling in place, narrowing dodging colliding with the woman in front of him.

She gasped.

James stared awkwardly at her for a moment.

"Oh, I uh, I'm sorry." James said.

"It's cool." She said.

She smiled and turned to walk away.

James couldn't believe how beautiful she was. Her long blonde hair draped perfectly over her shoulders and chest, meeting her black dress just right, as if to form an outline down her tapered waist and long legs. James wanted her, he needed her.

Stop her you idiot, stop her, James screamed within his own head, Say something. Say it now!

"Can I buy you a drink?" James said, blurting his words out in a jumble, "Please?"

She smiled, "Sure. Why not?"

James followed her back to the bar and fished out some cash as she ordered some weird drink that he'd never heard of, undoubtedly accompanied by a straw, an umbrella and glitter. James followed her order with another gin and tonic. He hated to be put on the spot and didn't know what else to order. The bartender acted quickly and the thick bowl of a glass met his every expectation as the beautiful girl claimed her prize.

"Thanks." She said, sipping her drink.

James stared at his hands, fumbling them nervously upon the bar. James couldn't believe he'd made a successful first move. He'd never made a successful first move and he didn't know what to do next, especially with a woman so incredibly beautiful.

She turned to walk away and James grabbed her arm.

"I'm sorry, James said, immediately releasing her, "What's... what's your name?"

"Samantha." She said, flatly.

"Do you want to dance?"

"Of course I do," She said.

James grinned, placing his hand on her arm.

"I do want to dance, but not with you." She said, teasing as she walked away.

James froze. He felt a fiery liquid in the back of his throat as if he were about to be sick, yet he couldn't force a single breath out, let alone anything else. James' whole body began to shake, causing him to spill his glass.

James gasped.

"I'm sorry." James said to the bartender, never making eye contact as he rushed out of the club.

Once outside, James fought for oxygen in a far too familiar fashion. Just another one of his pesky God damned panic attacks is what he was always told, as if the words panic and attack were to be refreshing when your chest is seemingly caving in.

James rushed to his van. He had to get out of here in the worst way. James should've known better than to leave the safety of his computer's blue glow upon his face, he had no business out with these people.

James climbed into the driver's seat and locked the door immediately. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," James screamed, pounding on his steering wheel.

Too shaken to drive, James laid his head upon his throbbing hands still clutching the steering wheel, his warm tears pooling on his forearms. He knew he needed to let it all go, to let her go. He couldn't help himself. He wanted her, he needed her.

"Stupid bitch," James screamed, raising his head.

Through tearful eyes, he saw her. She was laughing and hanging all over some muscular prick. She was going home with him. Going to do all the things that James wanted to do.

James watched as she lit a cigarette and joked with her male companion. He grew with anger, but couldn't look away. He still wanted her from afar, living through voyeurism like those pathetic guys in the online films he'd watched, often with the point of view of some weirdo hiding in the bushes and filming a couple making love. With that, he perked up in his seat. He knew what he must do, he would follow them. Waiting, watching and owning her.

They walked to his small, black car. They kissed deeply and the large man fumbled around in his pockets, presumably for his keys. Nothing, he patted his pants frantically, said something to Samantha and then walked back toward the club. He left her there alone. He left her there and something clicked in James' mind. He knew what he must do, though before he truly put it all together, he had his van in drive.

James sped up next to the small, black car and stopped suddenly right next to Samantha, startling her as she stood oblivious to her surroundings, smoking a cigarette and checking her reflection in the tinted windows. James chuckled at the sound of her scream as he put it in park and hopped into the back of his van.

One... two... three...

James jerked open the side door to his van, yanked Samantha inside and shut the door behind her. She screamed, he grabbed her by her hair and ears and began to slam her head against the wall of the van until she went limp. He quickly hopped back into the driver's seat and sped off into the night.

* * *

"Help me," Samantha screamed, "Where am I? Please, somebody help!"

Total Darkness filled the van. Not even the shine of the moon was to be seen. James sat close, though out of reach from Samantha. He laughed as she screamed. He didn't know why, but something about it tickled him.

James reached above his head and turned on an overhead work lamp. With a loud pop, the fan lit with a white glow. James laughed harder at the sight of Samantha's squinty face.

"You should see yourself," He laughed, "Even I wouldn't buy that face a drink."

Samantha curled up into a ball against the opposing wall of James, terror and confusion written on her face. James fought to not show it, but he actually felt the same. He didn't quite know what he was doing, but knew it was too late not to.

She clutched her head and began screaming again at the sight of blood. The shrill sound echoed in James' ears.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," James screamed, leaping on top of her, "Shut the Hell up!"

Samantha grew silent and still as James straddled her legs. He looked down at her, her makeup smudged and cheeks moist, she still looked so beautiful to him. She matched James' gaze as he stared into her eyes, admiring her.

"What do you want from me?"

James remained silent to her question, for he didn't know how to answer it.

What do you want with her? This question echoed within his mind.

The longer he thought about it and the longer he stared at Samantha, the angrier he grew. She was so damn beautiful, but too beautiful for James it seemed. She flirted with him, pretended to like him and once she got what she wanted, she left him in the wind.

"What do I want from you," James said, pounding the floor next to Samantha's head, "What do I want from you?"

James smiled, "I want to dance."

Samantha began to scream as James fought to get her clothes off. He grabbed her face hard and forced his forehead against hers, staring into her eyes and breathing heavily. She fell silent and shut her eyes, squeezing tears as she turned her head to the side.

James reached over to his tool box and removed a box cutter. He slid out the blade and pressed it to her cheek. She gasped, but didn't move. He lightly slid the blade across her cheek, down her chin and throat, leaving a pale white scratch in her skin. James lifted her dress from her body, stabbed his blade through it and cut downward until her sleek, black dress was nothing more than a flat cloth beneath her.

"You're so beautiful." James said.

He grabbed the front of her bra and cut the strap, loosening it on her body. He laid down his blade and grabbed one cup with each hand, lifting them off and to the side to reveal her bare chest. Her tiny pink nipples stood erect to his touch. She quivered underneath him as he rubbed his fingertips over her chest, up to her neck and back down toward her bellybutton.

"Just so beautiful." James whispered.

James grabbed his blade again and slid it up and down her body, as he had his fingers. He stopped at her waist and then lifted her panties away from her body; he cut the front cloth over her legs and let her panties fall flat to the floor. James could feel her warmth as he ran his fingers and box cutter lightly over her thighs.

"So beautiful," James said, sliding back up toward her face, "Too beautiful."

James kissed her forehead and breathed in deeply. He wanted her, he

needed her and now he had her. He owned her entirely, yet knew the only reason why. Samantha, the vibrant and beautiful girl from the club, the one that he now saw up close, had become a great cause for frustration. James knew he should hate her for what she did to him, yet every time he looked at her all he saw was beauty. Her greatest deception, the lie of her beauty. James sat up and looked at Samantha, who now met his gaze again. James gritted his teeth and squeezed his box cutter with his sudden realization of the illusion that was Samantha. They both screamed as he plunged his blade into her face over and over again. Blood splattered all over the van as she gasped for breath and fought from under James. Her face swelled and oozed as James silently stared at her twitching and screaming under him.

"God damn it," James screamed, "You're still too damn beautiful for me!"

Infuriated, James threw his box cutter against the wall and fondled about in his tool box until he felt the cold steel of his ball peen hammer he'd used so many times on various jobs. He clutched it tightly and wielded it from the tool box to Samantha's face. Again and again, he pounded her head until he flattened it. Blood, skull and brains pooled on the van floor as James straddled the now virtually headless woman.

"There now, isn't that better?" James stared at the mess, "Not too beautiful now, huh?"

James dropped the hammer into the mess and climbed off of her. He climbed into the front seat of his van, pushed the button on his garage door opener and pulled out into the street. He found Samantha's purse tossed next to his seat and fished out her license to check for an address. James drove to the one listed on her license. James parked along the curb out front of the property with a small, black car in the drive way. He opened the back of his van and rolled her body out onto the street. James tossed out her clothes and then grabbed the broom amidst shovels and various other tools on his van wall to sweep out the bits of blood, skull and brain. Once cleaned up as best he could, James looked down at Samantha and smiled. Everybody experienced those certain kinds of nights that start off normal enough, though end in a way that completely change your life. This night with Samantha was absolutely one of those nights. No longer would he have to sit in front of his computer alone, as he'd finally learned how to treat a beautiful woman.

"Thanks for a lonely night," James said, "We'll have to do this again sometime."

James slammed the van door shut and climbed into the front seat. He looked at the small, black car in the drive way and the house that he'd have been sleeping comfortably in had she not been so unlucky.

Too bad for her, she'd been just too damn beautiful.

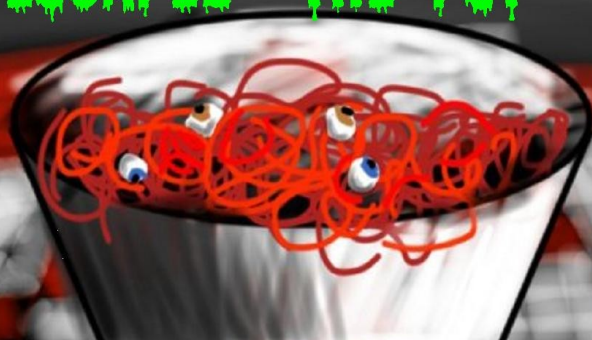
The moral is: Beauty is only skin deep.

More From Panic Press...



FRANCIS W. ALEXANDER

WHILE TREATING MY LADY AT
ZOM'S RIB SHACK,
THE WAITER INQUIRED HOW I
ESCAPED THE POT





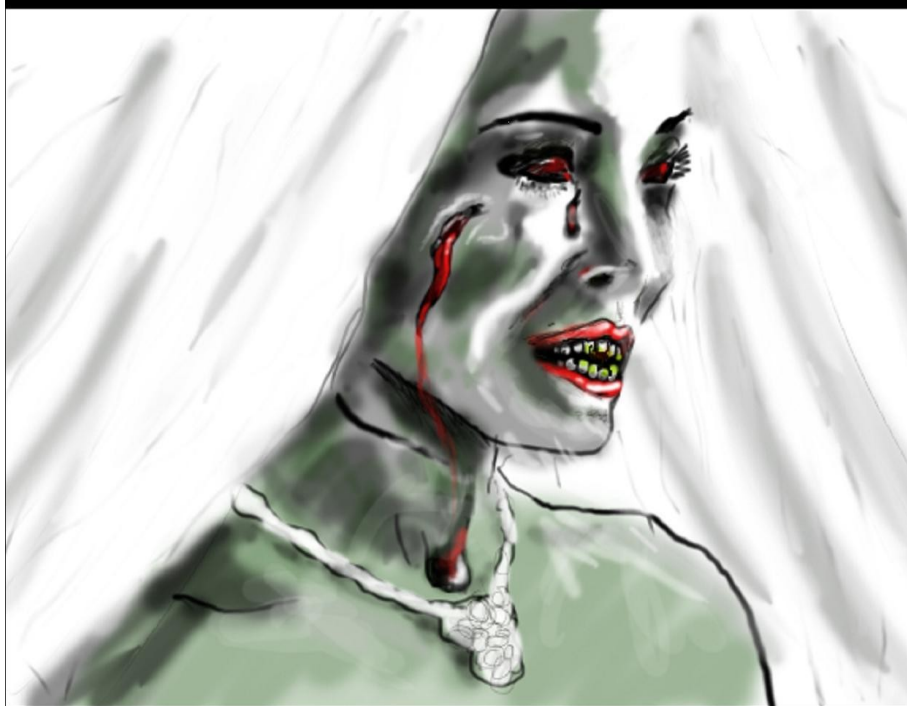
THE FLESHING



*DEATH IS ONLY
THE BEGINNING*

Walter Jarvis

The Dead Shall Feed



JASON WHITTLE

SINS & Tragedies



STEPHEN W. ROBERTS,

JD Stone

THADD PRESLEY

Stacy Bolli

A movie poster for 'Oliver Muncing Exorcist'. The background is dark with a large, bright, fiery explosion or fire in the center. A white lightning bolt strikes down from the top left. In the foreground, a silhouette of a person is visible, possibly a priest or exorcist, standing with arms outstretched. The title 'EXORCIST' is written in large, white, stylized letters with a jagged, dripping effect. Above it, 'OLIVER MUNCING' is written in red. At the top, 'JOHN PAULITS' is written in red.

JOHN PAULITS

OLIVER MUNCING
EXORCIST



Christopher Hivner

*Moonlight
Glinting off the
Blade*